KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

1 John 5:21

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

5:20 says, “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” In this verse, we see that the word “true” is written three times. It is in Greek *Alēthinos*, which can be translated real, authentic. When John says that he is the true God and eternal life”, this could be an excellent ending of this epistle in a positive statement. However, John had to write one more verse, “Dear, children, keep yourselves from idols.” The word “idol” is in Greek *Eidolon*, meaning an image (for worship), by implication a false god. John ends this epistle with this negative expression, instead of a positive one, as written in the epilogue of John’s gospel, “Do you truly love?...Feed my lamb”… Follow me” or as in Paul’s writing of Ephesus, “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (Ephesians 6:24).

We see that in verses 20 and 21, the true God and a false god are sharply contrasted. In ending this epistle, John is doing something that is very characteristic of himself. We have seen repeatedly his liking for contrast. He is very fond of comparing—light and darkness, love and hate, what is true and what is false. Or we can put it like this: John is also very fond of the negative expression; he never contented himself with just the positive one. So, he generally puts his positive expression first and then his negative, and as he does here. Sometimes a negative manifestation is very powerful as written in 2:15, “Do not love the world or anything in the world” or here “Keep yourselves from idols.” Actually this negative expression is a warning. John, out of his long experience, knew the importance of warnings. How often he warns these people to be aware of the world, of the antichrists, these false teachers, and false doctrine; to be aware of claiming great things in theory and forgetting to put them into practice. John is full of warnings of that kind, and he actually ends this wonderful epistle on this note. Then let’s expound this verse, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” The expression “dear children” is written 9 times in this epistle, which is in most other translations “little children.” This great apostle John, a very old man, speaks to his spiritual children as if he speaks his last word, “Keep yourselves from idols.”

**First, idols and idolatry.** Interestingly, John did not write, “Keep yourselves from the evil one”, but “keep yourselves from idols.” The evil one, called devil or Satan, is a person, yet, invisible. What is an idol? An idol is a visible object people make. As is mentioned above, the word “idol” is in Greek *Eidolon*, meaning an image (for worship), by implication a false god.

The word “idol” is written more than 200 times in the Bible, around 30 times in the New Testament, and John used this word just one time here at the end of this epistle. The first occurrence of this word is in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Decalogue begins with these words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below…” “You shall not make for yourself an idol” is the second of the Ten Commandments. Then in Exodus 32, when Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites gathered around Aaron and proposed him to make gods. Aaron agreed and let the people bring their gold earrings. Exodus 32:4 says, “He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘There are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” They degraded the LORD their God, Jehovah, into this man-made idol, a golden calf, exchanging the invisible one into a visible one. It was none other than the degrading of their hearts; their hearts were utterly corrupted, forgetting the LORD their God so quickly. Leviticus 19:4 says, “Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast meatal for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.” Idols and gods are interchangeably used. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live…”

“Do not make an idol” is a constant message of the prophets for the Israelites in the Old Testament. For instance, Moses said in Deuteronomy 4:16-17, “…do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air…” Samuel said in 1 Samuel 12:21, “Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.” When Jeroboam became king of northern Israel, he made two gold calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. He instituted this convenient worship so that the people might not give their allegiance to the king of Judah through going the far south to Jerusalem and worshiping there. And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there (1 Kings 12:27-30). From the beginning of the kingdom of northern Israel, it was the downfall of the kingdom. Psalm 96:5 says, “For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens” and Psalm 97:7 says, “All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols…” Isaiah 45:16 says, “All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced; they will go off into disgrace together.” When Paul was in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Ac 17:16). And he wrote in Romans 1:22-23, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” So many Greek gods and Roman gods were nothing but idols, totally worthless, and those who worshiped them became the object of God’s wrath. The last occurrence of the word idol is in Revelation 9:20, “The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk.” In Revelation 13, the second beast, that is called the false prophet, deceived the inhabitants of the earth, performing great and miraculous signs, and ordered them to set up an image in honor of the first beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed” (13:14-15). Idols and gods and images are all related as false or fake ones.

Yet, what the Bible really concerns is idolatry, which is the worship of an idol as though it were God. The great danger confronting us all is not a matter of deeds or of actions, but of idolatry. The fundamental thing is the outlook, the philosophy, the belief; and that is emphasized everywhere in the Bible. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:14, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

When John says here, “Keep yourselves from idols”, idol can mean simply anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. An idol is anything that I worship, anything to which I give much of my time and attention, my energy and my money; anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol. Idolatry may consist of having false notions of God. If I am worshipping my own idea of God and not the true and living God, that is idolatry. If your idea of God is not the biblical idea, if you have a false conception of him and are worshipping such notions and conceptions, according to the Scripture that is simply idolatry. It is possible for us to worship our religion instead of worshiping God. It is also possible for us to worship our own religious body, our own particular community, our own particular sect, our own particular point of view—these are the things we may be worshiping. Then, that’s idolatry. Theology has often become an idol to many people; they have really been worshiping ideas and not worshiping God. How easy it is to forget the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to stop at the ideas and the theories and the teaching concerning him. Anything that occupies this central position rather than God himself is an idol.

We remember God’s command to Abraham to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, which was to help him that Isaac might not be an idol to him. Our children or spouses can be the idols. One’s profession can be an idol. If one studies only for his success in the world, it can be also an idol. In our time, to many people, sex is an idol being practiced outside marriage so prevalently. Definitely sports is an idol to many. Technology or science can also evidently be an idol. To many young people, pop singers or movie stars are idols, such as in Korea where singers are referred to as “idols”. It seems that we are living in the generation of idols. There is even a TV program, called, “American Idol.”

But perhaps the supreme idol is self, for in the last analysis we can trace all the others back to self. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:1, “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.” He starts the list with “people will be lovers of themselves” and ends the list with “lovers of pleasures rather than lovers of God.” The ultimate idol about which we have to be so careful is this horrible self—this concern about myself, putting myself where God ought to be. There are many self-centred Christians, not Christ-centred. Believing in Christ is good, but when the faith becomes self-centred, it is a serious matter.

When John says, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols”, it might well mean, “Beware that you do not put yourself in the place of God.” The greatest danger in the spiritual life is idolatry, and it comes into all our activities.

**Second, keep yourselves from idols.** We are to know that idols are the means or weapons through which the evil one, the devil attacks us. So it is a spiritual battle to keep or guard ourselves from idols. We learned that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ keeps his people safe and the evil one cannot harm them. It is also necessary that we should keep/guard ourselves with the faith that he keeps us safe, recognizing that we are in a spiritual warfare.

“Be on your guard” is a consistent message in the Scriptures. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” Jesus said in Matthew 16:6, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” and again in 16:11. Jesus said in Luke 12:15, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” Apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 3:17, “be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless men and fall from your secure position.” I must guard myself. I must guard my spirit, my heart, and my mind and understanding. To guard myself I must be constantly on the watch primarily for the evil one. I must be careful that some idol is not receiving my time and energy and the things that should be given to God.

To be on our guard, we should watch and pray. Jesus said to Peter, James, and John at Gethsemane, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation…” (Mt 26:41; Mk 14:38). According to Luke’s gospel, at the Last Supper Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:3-32). Also, we see importance of praying for God’s flock of sheep. As we thought of in the first part, the prophet Samuel warned his people, saying, “Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. Then he continued, “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you…” (1 Samuel 12:23)

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” The counter positive command for this negative expression is Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Who is the LORD? The LORD is the one who sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and as the Saviour of the world. He is the only One who is worthy of our love and worship and wholehearted devotion. Our love for God should be mixed with the love of the world. It should be pure and exclusive. Loving God solely is constantly abiding in Jesus in the vine and branch relationship. Jesus said in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Our fellowship with the Lord is to be alive each day as John says that our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. It is to live by the Spirt and keep in step with the Spirit, praying for the Spirit’s filling. As we thought of, self can be the supreme and ultimate idol. The remedy for this is Jesus’ instruction for all his followers, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Guarding ourselves from idols also includes doing all for the glory of God, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” May we remember these words as the last word of 1 John, being aware that the greatest danger in our spiritual life is idolatry.