SPIRITUAL IDOLATRY PART 2

By John Angell James



4. There are idols of the WORLD



—idols which the children of this world worship, and in whose worship the children of light sometimes unite. What crowds are continually assembled in the 'temple of fashion'—that bright but graceful deity of taste and elegance. What costly sacrifices of modesty, sobriety, time, money, usefulness, are offered on this altar! The study, the solicitude, the happiness, of many are considerably made up of matters of fashion. A recognized defect of taste would more distress them, than a breach of truth or justice! A perceived lack of elegance be a far more serious matter, than a lack of piety or mercy! And to be behind some of their mirthful neighbors in some new mode of dress, furniture, or style of living—is far worse than to be lacking in honor, generosity or gratitude! Fashion is, in short, the **God** of their idolatry; before which, however frequently they go to church or chapel, or with whatever fervor they repeat their prayers, their hearts bow down, and pay their homage!

And is there no undue devotion paid to this idol by professors of religion? Is there not a turning aside, at any rate, from **God**, to visit the shrine of this delusive goddess? How concerned are some good people about gentility, elegance, and fashion. See them in their dress, in their furniture, in their entertainments, in their late hours. Hear them in their conversation about what is new, tasty, splendid. Behold them even in their religion, choosing fashionable beliefs, churches, preachers, and regulating even their worship to **God**, by taste! And could you search their hearts as **God** does, and observe the solicitude, the contrivance, the plans and purposes—which are cherished in their bosom—to shine, to excel, to be admired, to be thought elegant and of good taste, to be admitted to be the first of their circle for what is fashionable—you would recognize, at once, the idol at whose altar they often bow with the multitude!

How much more concerned are they about these matters than about spirituality of mind, mortification of sin, the cultivation of the fruits of the Spirit, and fitness for heaven. The simplicity that is in **Christ** is gone from such minds. **God** is, perhaps, their **God**; but they linger so much, and so often, and so long, about the temple of fashion, that it is a doubtful matter whether their hearts are true to him or not. They are so anxious to get as near as possible to the people of the world in their general habits, as to leave it a question whether they do not belong more to them than to the people of **God**! Or, if they cannot give up the Lord, it is evident they want to serve him in the priestly dress, and with the rights of an idol.

Literature and science are among the idols of the world; and far more dignified are they than the one I have just mentioned; and yet they may be, and they are, with many, the supreme good, and thus are the gods of the mind and the heart. How many almost worship 'knowledge', and the means of obtaining it; not indeed the knowledge of the true **God**, and **Jesus Christ** whom he has sent; but the knowledge of nature. Nature is their deity, and this globe the temple in which they adore her. Even some good men who have a thirst for information, a love for books, a taste for science, carry this too far, and are in danger of being more enamored by what is intellectual, than by what is moral; and of deriving their happiness too much from the seen and temporal things—amidst which they are led by the senses; than from unseen and eternal things—which can be apprehended by faith alone.

5. There are the idols of the SANCTUARY.



Even in **God**'s house, as in the temple of old, there are other objects set up for worship beside himself—and above himself. There, where **God** should be supreme and alone—are to be found altars raised, and offerings presented to his rivals! What subtle homage is paid to human names, and human theological systems; and how much do we hear from some about the Fathers, and from others about Luther and Calvin, Wesley and Whitefield. What a cry is raised by multitudes in this day about the church. We hear more from some about 'the church', which is but the body, than about **Christ**, who is the Divine Head. The church is with them **Christ** visible; and the visible **Christ** seems to be more thought of, and spoken of, than the invisible **Christ**. The influence and authority of the latter is by these people delegated to, if not supplanted by, the former. The church is the great object of their faith and confidence, and hides from their view, or goes far towards hiding, the Redeemer of the world himself. The sacraments are more talked of than the gospel, more relied upon, more inculcated, more exalted—than justification by faith. A human priesthood, though in their view designed to reflect, eclipses the luster of—that which is divine. Human standards of opinion and faith are raised to all but an equality with the only perfect, infallible, and authoritative one. In short, on arriving at the house of **God**, instead of finding **God** alone presented to their attention in the simplicity of his own truth and worship; instead of making him the Alpha and Omega, before which the mind and heart are to lie prostrate, they bow before various other objects, all pretending to lead to him, but which in fact interpose between him and the soul, to turn away the attention of the worshiper from **Jehovah Jesus**, and share the throne with him!

Others again convert the preacher into an idol. Ardently attached to some favorite minister, they can relish the truth only as dispensed by him; and all others are neglected, if not despised. No prayers excite their devotion but his; no sermons instruct, please, or edify but his. When he is not in the pulpit, they will listen to no other. Their religion and their religious comfort depend all on him. The clearest elucidation of truth, the grandest views of the Divine character, the fullest exhibitions of **Christ**, the most consoling manifestations of heavenly glory, are nothing except from his lips; in this case the preacher is converted into an idol, and it is he that is worshiped, and not **God**.

Alas, alas, in how many ways does the heart of man go astray from **God**! And out of what materials does it construct its idols! It aggravated the sinfulness of the idolatry of the ancients, that they paid their worship to such low objects, and changed the glory of **God** into creeping things. And how does it increase our folly and guilt that we do the same.

My dear friends, let me admonish you to worship **God** alone. Give your heart, your whole heart to him. Is it not your sin, and ought it not to be your shame and your sorrow—that you bestow so much of your affection upon other objects, and so little upon him—that you treat him so little as such a **God** deserves, and claims to be treated? Recollect he is **God**, **God** in **Christ**; **God** reconciled, your Father, your portion; all glorious and all gracious. Think how

you ought to love him, with what entire, ardent, constant, devoted affection. It would seem, when we consider his glory, as if it would be the easiest thing in the world to love and serve him, and the hardest thing in the world to love any other objects; as if it would be impossible so to get out of the sight, and beyond the attraction of his glory, as to have time, inclination, or ability to take an interest in anything else than in his favor, which is life, and his loving-kindness which is better than life; as if with the hope of his favor through **Christ** as our portion, we should really no more desire any other object or source of delight, than the condemned criminal does besides the royal pardon, or the starving man the supply of food. Amazing baseness, that with an infinite **God** to love, we should be so taken up with the finite, and many of them the really minute objects of this world; and that with his love to us as our river of pleasure, we should be so dependent for bliss upon the 'drops of earthly enjoyment', which ooze and trickle out from created good!

How offensive this must be to **God**, who knows, and who alone knows, the ineffable glories of his own nature! How ungrateful must it appear to him when he has opened this fountain of living waters for us, to see us turn away from it, to hew out broken cisterns that can hold no water! How insulting to him to see a relative, a trade, a house, a minister—exalted into a rival claimant for the heart, and receiving that affection, confidence, and devotedness which are due to him alone! Remember he is a jealous **God**—and as among men jealousy is inflamed to the highest pitch by seeing an unworthy and insignificant object preferred, so **God** will, and must, resent our preference, to him, of such objects as this world at best can present.

Our sin in this matter is our punishment. "They forsake their own mercy," said the prophet, "who observe lying vanities." This is as true of spiritual idolatry as it is of that which is literal. "Those who forsake the Lord shall be ashamed." To turn from **God** to the creature; to place our dependence upon, and seek our happiness in, the creature instead of the former, is only to prepare for ourselves the bitterness of disappointment, vexation, and self-reproach! It is to turn from the sun to the dim candle, whose light soon expires in smoke and offensive odor! It is to turn from the full and flowing fountain to the clouds without rain, and the wells without water. The experience of others, as well as our own, demonstrates that, generally speaking, our severest trials, our most painful inflictions, come from those objects which we have loved and served at **God**'s expense. It is just and wise in **God**, as a salutary warning to us in future, and as a caution to others—that our idols should become our scourges!

Creature love, when excessive and indulgent, to the neglect of **God**, must draw away the strength of a renewed heart, and impoverish the soul of her spiritual wealth and prosperity. To many it is perfectly evident that their religion, under the weakening and withering influence of this undue regard to some worldly object, has sunk to a mere form; they have a name to live, but are dead; and if they reflect at all, it is in some such strain as the poet's—

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.

Through the deceitfulness of the heart, we are very apt to be imposed upon by the pure and lawful objects which, in some cases, are thus idolized. Lawful I mean in themselves, and sinful only in the excessive degree in which they are regarded. As professors of true religion, you do not and cannot love and worship sin. The children of this world may do this, and exalt their vices into gods. But many of your idols are virtues—or objects in themselves quite innocent. You may, and ought to love your relatives; you may and ought to value your business, home, ministers, and ordinances of religion; and these things become sinful, only when loved more than **God**. Here lies the difficulty—to keep them in due subordination to **God**. Yet the deceitfulness of the heart takes advantage of this difficulty, to blind us to the distinction between lawful and unlawful love, and to hurry us over the line of demarcation.

Let me, my dear friends, earnestly admonish you to give this subject a deep and due consideration. Examine your hearts. Does not the charge of spiritual idolatry appertain to you? Is there not some object, or class of objects, that have come between **God** and your souls? Have you no idols? Has your heart departed from the Lord? Search the mind, the house, the shop, the sanctuary, the world—and see where it has gone, and what you have exalted into a competitor with **God**. Be faithful to yourself. Is there not something for which **God** has a controversy with you? Ask yourself what it is you trust in, look to, depend upon, for happiness. Do you indeed look through and above all—to **God**? Is **God** your center, rest, and dwelling place? Is **Christ** more to you than everything else? Is it he that is precious? Is he the chief among ten thousand, and the altogether lovely one? Is he the sun that makes the day of your prosperity, the moon that enlivens the night of your adversity? Is he your riches, your friend, your home, your pearl of great price? Say, dear brethren, is **God** really **God** to you—loved and treated as **God** should be?

Ask yourselves if while you are praying for the downfall of idols in heathen countries—are there are none to be pulled down in your own hearts and houses? If while you are seeking the conversion of the worshipers of the Hindu deities, you have not need to be converted from the worship of self and mammon? Be humbled, deeply humbled—for this your sin!

How low many live, as Christians. Seek for more grace to give your heart, your whole heart to **God**. He demands it, will take no denial, and allow of no excuse for the refusal. In his sight, it is of little consequence by what object this demand is set aside; there is not so much variety in the shades of criminality as many are led to suppose—the object may be more decent, and more lawful in itself, but the affection with which it is loved is still an illicit one.

In conclusion, I say to you, adopt the language of the poet in another part of the hymn already quoted—

The dearest idol I have known,
Whatever that idol be,
Help me to tear it from your throne,
And worship only thee!

So shall my walk be close with **God**.
Calm and serene my frame,
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

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