SPIRITUAL IDOLATRY PART 1

By John Angell James



The apostle John closes his first epistle with the following tender and solemn admonition—"Little children, keep yourselves from idols!" Those to whom he thus addressed himself had been converted from Paganism, and needed to be cautioned against relapsing into their former idolatry, and against every practice which would in the smallest degree seem to countenance it. There is no need that I should warn you against this sin in its literal import. You have never bowed the knee to a graven or molten image, and never will—but is there no such thing as SPIRITUAL idolatry? The first commandment of the decalogue says—"You shall have no other gods before me." The meaning of this precept, which is the foundation of all religion, is not merely that we shall not acknowledge any other **God** besides **Jehovah**—but also that we shall treat him as **God**! That is, we must love him with all our hearts, serve him with all our lives, and depend upon him for our supreme felicity. It is obvious that all this, as well as prayer and praise, is the worship which **God** requires.

The bended knee, whether this be done to **God** or an idol, is of no value—but as the expression of the state of the mind and heart at the time. The affections are a much more sincere and expressive homage than bodily attitudes and outward forms of devotion. Hence it is obvious that—whatever we love most, and are most anxious to retain and please—whatever it be we depend most upon for happiness and help—whatever has most of our hearts—that is, in effect, is our **God**!—whether it be **Jehovah** or Jupiter, or whether it be friends, possessions, or our own desires, or our own selves! Is it not, therefore, to be feared that the hearts of many professors are going too much after other objects of worship than **God**, and need the admonition, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols!" Of these objects of spiritual idolatry there are many classes.

1. There are the idols of the HEART!



SELF is the great idol which is the rival of **God**, and which divides with him the worship of the human race. This is "the idol that disgusted the Lord and made him furious"—even in the temple of the Lord! It is surprising and affecting to think how much SELF enters into almost all we do. Besides the grosser form of self-righteousness, which leads many unconverted people actually to depend upon their own doings for acceptance with **God**; how much of self-seeking, self-valuing, self-admiration, self-dependence—there is in many converted ones! How covertly do some seek their own praise in what they professedly do for **God**, and their fellow-creatures! How eager are they for the admiration and applause of their fellow-creatures! How much of self, yet how little suspected by themselves, is seen by One who knows them better than they know themselves, at the bottom of their most splendid services, donations, and most costly sacrifices! What admiration do some cherish of their pious experience, their painful conflicts, their deep sorrows, their lively joys, their full assurance! With what feelings complimentary to themselves do they secretly meditate on these exercises, or relate them to their friends! How much do some dote on their blameless conduct, their spotless character, and the estimation in which they are held by the church and the world—they make an idol of their reputation!

I knew a venerable man who attained to the age of seventy, in blameless conduct. He was esteemed for his sanctity by all who knew him, and then fell into odious immorality. On being asked if he could trace his fall to any ascertainable cause, he replied, "I was proud of my reputation, and Satan taking advantage of this state of mind, tempted me, and I was taken in the snare of my own pride!" In how many ways does self steal away the heart from **God**. How subtle are its workings, how concealed its movements, yet how extensive is its influence. How SELF perverts our motives, lowers our aims, corrupts our affections, and taints our best actions. How much incense is burned—and how many sacrifices are offered on the altar of this idol!

2. Next to these, come the idols of the HOUSE!



Our relatives, next to **God**, demand and deserve our regard. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, are not only impelled by instinct, but commanded by **God**, to love one another. It is the law of nature and of revelation. These dear objects of our affection, and all the tender charities and kind offices which arise out of the ties that bind us to them—are the sources of the purest and most lawful enjoyments upon earth. The poet has beautifully said—"Domestic happiness is the only true bliss that has survived the fall."

But then the love we bear our friends must be subordinate to that we cherish for **God**. He must have the throne of the heart—and all others must rise no higher than the footstool. If we depend upon these dear relations for happiness, more than upon **God**'s favor; if in calculating our possessions, and adding up the sum total of our enjoyments, we naturally place them first; if in felicitating ourselves upon what we have, we turn to these before **God**; if we dread most the loss of these; if we feel that nothing could make us happy if these were removed; if we go daily and hourly to these alone for gratification; if they are enjoyed solely by themselves, and for themselves, apart from **God**; if instead of leading our hearts to **God**, they hold our hearts from **God**; if we are more solicitous to avoid what would endanger their continuance, than the continuance of **God**'s

favor; if the temporary interruption of their enjoyment affects us more than the loss of the enjoyment of **God** and holy privileges; if upon their removal we feel forlorn and desolate, as if we had lost our all, or imagine that such would be our state in the event of such a calamity—then is it but too plain, that these are our idols, and that we are worshiping them!

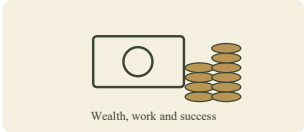
How evident is it to all but themselves, and at times suspected even by them, that many husbands and wives are to each other as **God**. Their reciprocal smiles are more to them than the light of **God**'s countenance; and their reciprocal love more to them than the loving-kindness of their heavenly Father. And how many parents need the simple exhortation of the old writer, "Beware of the little idols in white frocks." I would not have parental affection diminished. Who would abate the vigilance, and tenderness, and ceaseless labors of maternal love? Who could interfere to arrest the care which is necessary to guard, and feed, and train those little helpless beings, who are so dependent on a mother's eye, and arm, and heart? But then I would remind that mother, that she has a **God** to love, and serve, and please, as well as a child—a **God** that is in himself, and ought to be to her, infinitely more than that lovely son. And if all her thoughts, and feelings, and purposes, and aims, flow in one undivided current to that child, is he not her idol? **God** will not be, ought not to be, forgotten and neglected, even for a husband or a wife, a parent or a child. Nor has he rendered it impossible to love him supremely, and at the same time our earthly relatives adequately. The two are not incompatible with each other. Multitudes of husbands and wives have loved each other tenderly—and yet have loved **God** supremely. Multitudes of parents have loved their children judiciously, fondly, laboriously—and yet have loved **God** supremely. Accept, then, the word of exhortation; beware of allowing your hearts to be too much engrossed by these dear objects of your best earthly affection.

In some cases it is not so much any one object of home, but the whole that steals the heart from **God**—a comfortable home, made up of relatives, a commodious house, plenty, health; in short, a quiet and agreeable domicile. The pleasures of the domestic circle are some of the sweetest known on earth; and he who has a happy home, has to resist one of the most powerful rivals and competitors with **God** for his heart. To return from the scene of his daily toil—to a quiet home greeted by the smiles of a devoted wife and affectionate children, with plenty on his table, and ease in his mind, oh! what danger is he in, of feeling that he has little need of **God**'s favor or heaven's glories to make him happy; of saying, or at least feeling, "This is my temple, my **God**, my heaven!"

In some cases, a splendid house and gardens, elegant furniture, and all the appendages of wealth—are the idols in which the heart delights, and the affections luxuriate. How vain is the owner of his beautiful domain—what a pride he takes in it. As he walks about his paradise, his spirit is elated within him; to keep it in order and beauty is the study of his mind, and the happiness of his life. Amidst all his prosperity, **God** is too little thought of, and less enjoyed. His possessions lead him not, as they should do—to the Giver, but detain his soul from her divine center and rest. It is a paradise, but it is also an earthly one, in which he rather communes with the visible world, than the invisible **God**! It is a scene where he looks not at unseen and eternal things—but at things seen and temporal.

Such are the idols of the house.

3. There are also idols of the SHOP.



Wealth, work and success

Some religious people are blessed with a prosperous and thriving trade, or lucrative profession; they have, perhaps, acquired a name, an established reputation, an extensive credit; their profits are considerable; their property increases; their respectability rises; their neighbors look on, some with envy, others with surprise. How dangerous to the soul is this state of things. Such a business often becomes a too successful competitor with **God** for the heart. These prosperous tradesmen are apt to embark their whole soul in their business; it is their happiness; their dependence; their one chief solicitude. They admire their success; value themselves on account of it; watch it with a most acute sensibility; tremble if anything looks like a symptom of change; see with distressing jealousy the incipient prosperity of others in the same line; felicitate themselves on the greatness of their returns; exalt themselves upon the solidity of their credit, and the esteem in which they are held by the world; go to the scene of their success with conscious pride; in short, their soul is bound up in their trade—it is their idol. They in effect say to it, "You are my **God**—save me." But where is their religion all this while? Did they ever possess any? If so, it is lamentably low, lukewarm, and feeble. "I assure you: It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven! Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of **God**." Let such men know, they cannot serve **God** and mammon. The Spirit of **God**, like the glory of the Lord departing from the temple of Jerusalem, will retire from such a heart, for it has become the seat of an idol, which has his altar, and his service, and his worshiper there.

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