

Col 3:5-11 (ESV)

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

It's one of the great success stories of our time: The Build-a-Bear franchise. There are over 300 of these workshops worldwide, and is one of the in things to do. Not many of you have little kids at the moment, so let me fill you in on how this works. You take your squirming, squealing little girls and their friends, send them on a sugar high, and then take them to one of the big shopping centers like East Rand Mall to the Build-a-Bear workshop. This is how it works: You choose from over thirty models of teddy bears. Then you take your bear and stuff it, stitch it, fluff it, dress it, accessorise it, choose the sound it makes, and name it. Then you slap down your entire months' salary on the counter, and there you go – your girls have their “berry own bear!” You even get a customised birth certificate. Ta da!

Now the Colossians weren't building bears. They were building gods. They were spending time in proto-gnostic build-a-god workshops. You can read all about the tools and the trade of Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi texts. The basic teaching was that since God is pure spirit, matter (the flesh, this world with all its trappings) is inherently evil. So if God is good, where does the evil world come from? Ah, says Gnosticism, matter came about as a result of a series of “emanations” from God, each slightly less than the one that came before it. These beings were given names, such as aeons, thrones, dominions, rulers, or authorities, and they were identified with certain angels. The gnostic specialty was to speculate and ruminate about this series of gods they were building. And the last god in the chain – the discount model, if you will – was the demiurge, and he made the world by mistake, trapping you and me here in these bodies. Ah yes, it all makes sense now, doesn't it? Now the key to happiness, salvation, and eternal redemption is escape – get out – and the way to get out is knowledge – gnosis – that helps you escape and pass from one level to the next. Secret knowledge gives you the password that you need to give to each emanation, to each guardian god barring the way you must pass to union with the fullness, the ultimate god.

Where did this model come from? Ah, you see, the build-a-god workshops were one of the “success stories” of the age. They appealed to everyone: You take Jewish cosmology and phraseology, dress it with Christian soteriology, fluff it up with Greek Neoplatonic philosophy, accessorise it with Persian

mysticism, and hey presto! Ta da! The religion for everybody, with the best of both worlds, the faith that has it all for Greeks and Jews, and best of all, you get to tailor it and tweak it as you go along. One of the things that frustrated the church fathers more than anything else about the Gnostics was that none of them fully agreed with the other. Gnosticism was tailor-made idolatry to suit your own needs and tickle your own fancy.

Even though this might sound strange to some of you, in many ways, the thought and the spirituality of our time is getting more and more similar to the first century. From the theology of Disney to the spirituality of Joel Osteen and Oprah Winfrey, the spiritual options and accessories that are on offer have not changed much, and the same thing goes for the ethics involved with them. Let's face it: There is a part in all of us that delights in, shall we say, "creative craftsmanship." We fashion our own spirituality. We build our own god. We conceive it in our mind. We build it with our hands. We chose what it looks like. We personalize it with our preferences. It's just what we want in a god. It's a god who likes what I like, hates what I hate, and who shares my opinion. It is a god who increases my standard of living and happiness. This is a god who gives me what I want and stays out of my way the rest of the time. John Calvin once said that the human heart is a perpetual idol factory, and he was right. Commenting on the first commandment, Luther states in his Large Catechism, "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God."

What are some of the idols you and I are building? Oh, we take some of the prosperity gospel of Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar and mix it up with the feel-good spirituality of Oprah Winfrey. We take the sexual liberation of the age of tolerance, fluff it up with the libertarianism of the pornography industry, and dress it all up with the freedom of the Christian. And we make a little god of our own, stuff it with secret knowledge of our own, and make it smile sweetly on our sins, with both eyes shut, unable and unwilling to see, head nodding in approval at all times. Rub the belly for luck, and it purrs: "As long as your heart is in the right place, it doesn't matter what you do. As long as you mean well, it's all good. You deserve better, you know. And don't forget: You know better than everybody else, and so – wink, wink – you are better than everybody else. But let's keep that between us."

Dear friends, the eternal Scriptures of the living God affirm that the worship of idols is worship "offered to demons." Just as our father Adam was deeply disappointed and spiritually violated after he fell for the Lord of the promise of secret knowledge, so do you experience nothing but misery, heartache, pain, emptiness, and insatiable desire when you fall for the same thing. No wonder David writes in Psalm 16:4, "The sorrows of those who run after other gods shall multiply."

In the context of such massive idolatry we have a word from God: You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. You want knowledge, says Paul? You want newness, glory, the things that are above? You want spiritual perfection, union with the fullness of God, and ultimate fulfilment? Then you are looking in the wrong place. You will not find it in the build-a-god workshop. But it is there for you in

Christ. Look to Christ. Look to him who came from the fullness of God, who died, who has been raised to the right hand of God. There is life. There is glory. There is your true creator who has remade his image in you and who renews you in knowledge. Where, when, how? In your baptism. You have died, died to ordinariness, died to decay and destruction, yes you have died to death itself. The key to salvation lies not in some esoteric secret knowledge or speculation, but in the life of Christ. The key to salvation lies in repentance and forgiveness, the key to eternal fulfilment lies in the baptismal life. This is the life of bringing daily your self-made god, your handmade idol, your custom-built religion, and throwing it in confession before the feet of Truth and Life and Light and Immortality, approaching the throne of God pleading only the love of His Son, and receiving daily from his hands the clothing of the blood of Christ, forgiveness, life, contentment, peace, splendour, glory, joy, of sanctification and the Spirit of God.

The core and call of Colossians is the call to live the sanctified life in Christ. To be empowered by the spirit of God to put to death in you those things that anger God and that incur his wrath: Your anger, your wrath, your malice, your obscene talk, your sexual immorality, your impurity, your passion, your evil desire, your covetousness, your discontent, and your idolatry. Put them away. Put them to death. Put them off. And receive healing in body and soul. Receive the newness of Christ. Receive the life of Christ. Receive the contentment of Christ.

In the fullness of time he came, and in one instant, he made himself breakable. He who was larger than the universe became a baby. And he who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of his teenage mother. Our God came, not as a flash of light, or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard in a cattle stall along with cows and sheep. No silk, no ivory, no hype, no hoopla.

His feet will feel the cold sea water and writhe at the invasion of the nail. His heart will be torn by people's accusations and be crushed under the weight of our sin. His eyes will see your shame, for you cannot hide. They will see your selfishness, for you cannot give. And they will see your pain, for you are so full of hurt. His hands will touch lepers, hold little children, break bread, claw the ground at Gethsemane, and be stretched out on a Roman instrument of death. Because he bled and died in your place, Jesus demonstrates that he alone is able to heal your hurts, forgive your filth, and defeat your death. No wonder the Bible says that idols are nothing and chaos and only compound your pain because a cross-less god is no god at all. A god who doesn't suffer, a god who knows no agony, a god who doesn't die; this is a god without grace, a god who cannot deliver, and a god who offers no hope and no future. But this is not your Jesus! He is crucified, but risen indeed! So it is time to turn in your tools, stop building substitutes, throw away the idols, and to never, ever again do business at a build-a-god workshop. God help us. And he will. For you are baptized. Amen.

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