

### Isaiah 1:21-23

<sup>21</sup> **How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; Righteousness lodged in it, But now murderers.** <sup>22</sup> **Your silver has become dross, Your wine mixed with water.** <sup>23</sup> **Your princes *are* rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them**

Weeding out idolatry.

What period of your life were you the most faithful to the Lord? When were you most willing to do **whatever Christ said** no matter how much it cost you? When did what He said most thrill your soul, when it felt like a long drink of water after a day in the hot sun? When would you say you were most on fire for the Lord, when you were willing to obey Him, even if it cost you the things that were dearest to you?

In our text, God is essentially reminding Judea of their history, of their roots, of a time when they as a country were actually committed to following their God. It is a lament about how far they have fallen. It is a sadness to God to see what His people were when they owned Him as their Lord and God. Now they are far from that condition and it is about to cost them dearly.

Where are **we** compared to where **we** were? Are we still willing to do what He says to do, to go where He leads, to sacrifice whatever is needed for His Kingdom's sake?

Let's look at what God has to say through the prophet Isaiah.

<sup>21</sup> **How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; Righteousness lodged in it, But now murderers.**

We begin with the faithful city. This refers to Jerusalem like a man would refer to a good wife who has remained faithful to him and him alone. She did not go outside the marriage vows to find fulfillment from another source.

That was the high point that the city has fallen from. It used to be a place of justice. And righteousness made it its home. It hung out here. It was **at home** here. But it has since made itself scarce.

I got this from Motyers commentary. **Righteousness and justice are rooted in divine holiness. Righteousness embodies holiness in sound principles, and justice is the expression of righteousness in precepts.**

This reference in our text to **harlotry** is to the **idolatry** of Jerusalem. This is not primarily a reference to sexual sin. Sexual sin is just the image that God uses to convey how God feels about their idolatry.

God is saying that his previous exemplary faithful wife has gone after other men, other sources of fulfillment and provision.

This would be a good place to define and explain idolatry.

When God laid out His will in regard to all human behavior in His law this is the first thing He said:

### **Exodus 20:3-6**

**<sup>3</sup> You shall have no other gods before Me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; <sup>5</sup> you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>6</sup> but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**

The very first thing that God commanded is that we would not allow anything that would compete with the worship of God. There was to be no other god or even a thing **conceived to be a likeness** of the one **true** God. God wanted no confusion on this point. Don't serve **other gods** or even **your own ideas** of this **one true God**. Any variation of worship would be considered idolatry. Idolatry is essentially the worship of a false God.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia tells us this about idolatry.

### **IDOLATRY**

(תַּרְפִּימִים, *terāphīm*, "household idols," "idolatry"; εἰδωλολατρεία, *eidōlolatreía*):

**There is ever in the human mind a craving for visible forms to express religious conceptions, and this tendency does not disappear with the acceptance, or even with the constant recognition, of pure spiritual truths. Idolatry originally meant the worship of idols, or the worship of false gods by means of idols, but came to mean among the Old Testament Hebrews any worship of false gods, whether by images or otherwise, and finally the worship of *Yahweh* through visible symbols ([Hosea 8:5-6](#); [Hosea 10:5](#)); and ultimately in the New Testament idolatry came to mean, not only the giving to any creature or human creation the honor or devotion which belonged to God alone, but the giving to any human desire a precedence over God's will ([1 Cor. 10:14](#); [Galatians 5:20](#); [Col. 3:5](#); [1 Peter 4:3](#)**

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

This is worth a quick look.

### **Colossians 3:1-5**

**<sup>1</sup> If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on things**

above, not on things on the earth.<sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ *who is our life* appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.<sup>5</sup> Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, **which is idolatry.**

Verse 5 talks about a broad range of desires for things we do not have. Paul defines covetousness as idolatry. So we are correct when we apply the concept of idolatry to even more than material representations of some kind of god. It can also be a conceptual idol, something that is given **god-status, worship status** in our lives.

Here is more information from Eastons Illustrated Bible Dictionary

**In Scripture, idolatry is regarded as of heathen origin, and as being imported among the Hebrews through contact with heathen nations. The first allusion to idolatry is in the account of Rachel stealing her father's teraphim ([Gen 31:19](#)), which were the relics of the worship of other gods by Laban's progenitors "on the other side of the river in old time" ([Jos 24:2](#)). During their long residence in Egypt the Hebrews fell into idolatry, and it was long before they were delivered from it ([Jos 24:14](#); [Ezek 20:7](#)). Many a token of God's displeasure fell upon them because of this sin.**

**The idolatry learned in Egypt was probably rooted out from among the people during the forty years' wanderings; but when the Jews entered Palestine, they came into contact with the monuments and associations of the idolatry of the old Canaanitish races, and showed a constant tendency to depart from the living God and follow the idolatrous practices of those heathen nations. It was their great national sin, which was only effectually rebuked by the Babylonian exile. That exile finally purified the Jews of all idolatrous tendencies.**

Illustrated Bible Dictionary

So idolatry began with physical manifestations of a competing God. But its concept eventually expanded to covetousness, which is that driving desire for that which we long for apart from our God's provision.

The working definition I have come to is that idolatry is looking for what only God can give us from some other source.

Now, let's go back again to verse

<sup>21</sup> **How the faithful city has become a harlot**

We talked two weeks ago about how God compares the sin of **idolatry against God** to sexual sins committed against God and others.

The word for harlot means, at its most literal, highly *fed* and therefore *wanton*.

It usually refers to a female either *committing adultery* (most often) or committing fornication

Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary.

Most simply put, a harlot is someone who pursues a lover outside of the bonds of marriage.

But implied in this pursuit is a person who has **everything they need**, yet they go in search of alternative experiences, alternative thrills, alternative security and provision. Desperation is not the motive. Essentially this person has no excuse for what they are choosing. They are just choosing this route because they want to, they feel like it.

This is the word God uses to describe the city of Jerusalem. They are unfaithful to their God. It isn't that God hasn't provided for them. It isn't that He hasn't taken care of them. It isn't that He has been unkind or uncaring to them. They just wanted something more, something different, something more to their fancy, something that would make them feel something different. So they chased another god. They abandoned **true worship** of the **true God** and allowed their worship to become **truly false**.

It is no wonder that God describes their worship as tiresome and irritating to Him. Think about this. It would be as if a man knows while his wife may still be cooking him supper and cleaning his house that she is sleeping with another man. When we understand it like this we can clearly see how going through the motions of service would mean less than nothing to God. In fact it would be insult added to injury.

Now this is where this passage begins to be personal.

How is it that we can easily imagine how horrible infidelity would be if it was **done to us**? We can experience that imagination with all its horrors easily. But we will not equate **idolatry with infidelity in our own lives**. We regard what someone could **do to us** as absolutely hideous, but we refuse to accept that **what we do** when we chase our favorite idols **is just as bad**. The biggest difference is, when **we** chase idols, we are doing this sin to someone who **has always treated us perfectly**.

Our idols aren't quite as easy to spot as the idols these people worshipped. We can't take our wooden statue off the shelf and throw it into the woodstove. Our idols are best spotted by the effect they have on our lives. We are far too sophisticated to admit to the worship of our idols. But we can see **the effects** of

our idol worship easier. We look to all kinds of things to bring us what only God can provide.

What do we trust to keep us safe?

What do we trust to give us joy?

What do we trust to give us meaning?

We can best tell what our idols are when they fail to deliver. Our strong emotions often reveal where our flaws lie, where our idols lie.

We can have wrong expectations of human relationships. We may expect them to deliver far more than they are capable of. We may expect them to bring us what only God can give to us. Sometimes the shortcomings of our love for each other serves as a notice that we have lost our first love.

We can have wrong expectations of money. We can think that only money can provide for us, only money can keep us safe, only money can make us secure. Sometimes we worship pleasure. We chase it with a commitment that only God should have in our lives. It gets the best of our time, the best of our resources. We orient all our hopes around it. Time is measured by the time of the next scheduled event.

What is the scariest thing that God could remove from your life right now? What would cause you to flip out if you lost it? Look at that closely. It might indicate idol worship. That fear might be a beacon to show you what it is you trust in this life more than God.

What do we rely upon and pursue for our meaning, for our contentment, for our happiness, for our validation, for our pleasure, for our protection, for our provision, for our purpose, for our fulfillment?

There is a very good book by Elyse Fitzpatrick called *Idols of the Heart*. I am going to quote some things from her book that are very helpful aids in hunting down our idols.

*What do I long for so much that my heart clamors, "Give me this, or else I'll die!"*  
*What must I have for life to be meaningful or happy? If I answer that question with anything other than God Himself, then that's what functions as a god for me. Idols aren't just stone statues. No, idols are the thoughts, desires, longings, and expectations that we worship in the place of the true God. Idols cause us to ignore the true God in search of what we think we need.*

*I can imagine that you might be wondering. Okay Elyse, how can I tell if I'm worshipping the blessings that I desire or God? Let me summarize in this way. If you are willing to sin to obtain your goal or if you sin when you don't get what you want, then your desire has taken God's place and you are functioning as an idolater.*

*The sin of unbelief lies at the heart of all other sins and particularly at the heart of idolatry. Idolatry is the most comprehensive description of the shape of unbelief used by the writers of the Bible. It is easy to see why. When we fail to believe the truth about who Jesus is and miss the impact of His astounding works in suffering and dying for our sin, it will be impossible to resist the allurements of the gods of this earth as they whisper their promised pleasures to us.*

*CS Lewis says this*

*We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*

*Even though I purposely choose to disobey God (as Eve did), I always do so because I believe that's the best choice at the time. Eve thought that eating the forbidden fruit was her best, most delightful and desirable choice. She believed that disobedience was better than life. She forgot God's sweet lovingkindness. Sin is always occasioned in us by our belief in its goodness, as Richard Baxter writes, "The will never desires evil as evil but as seeming good".*

*Where is your Happiness?*

*Man looks to idols to calm his fears and produce desired benefits- to bring him happiness. To identify your idols, begin to look at the thoughts and imaginations that bring you happiness. Ancient cultures had gods for all the misunderstood forces of nature, including gods of fertility and harvest. They worshipped these gods because children and good crops were recognized as sources of happiness. They were willing to sacrifice a portion of their harvest, or even a child if they could control their environment and gain some assurance of future joys. They trusted in false gods because they believed there was some profit in it. And we do the same thing.*

*Instead of fashioning idols out of wood or stone, we fashion them in our imagination- worshipping that which we believe will bring us happiness. We don't carve a good spouse out of a piece of pine, but we worship the thought of the joy that one would bring us. We don't chisel out a facsimile of the successful man or woman, but we believe that is where our joy can be found. We believe that our happiness is bound up in having our expectations fulfilled. These beliefs function as gods just as surely as if we had carved them from wood or overlaid them with silver. Our thoughts and pictures of imagined happiness are valuable to us. We can't imagine life without them.*

*Remember that your strongest desires, the things you are most passionate about, are what ultimately define your worship. If you passionately desire the respect of others, then your life will be colored by the fear of man. You'll worship other people's opinions. If you intensely crave acceptances, you'll be terrified of loneliness and rejection. You'll serve gods of man pleasing, peer pressure, or codependency. If you covet comfort, pleasure, or fun, you'll worship money or prestige as gods who hold the power to bless or curse you.*

I don't know how to put into words how important this is to all of us. I guess we just need to imagine how big of a deal infidelity would be in **our** relationships. Well God intentionally uses that as a word picture to clarify how big of a deal our idolatry is. Our idolatry is always a slap in God's face based on **the distrust** we have in Him to **give us all that we need**. He takes it very personally. Because it is very personal.

Not all sin is idolatry, but all idolatry is sin.

I am focusing on this this morning because it is vitally important. We have got to get this. We cannot have any tolerance in our sneaky hearts for this gravest of insults to God. We cannot allow our hearts to trust in other gods, other sources that promise to deliver only what God Himself is capable of delivering.

We must pray that God would reveal to us any of the idols we hold in our hearts. We must know if and where we are committing sins of this caliber so we can be weaned from them. Isaiah will make this point over and over again.

Now that we have laid a foundation for the seriousness of idolatry, we can move on.

<sup>21</sup> **How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; Righteousness lodged in it, But now murderers.**

I quoted someone's idea last week that when the first four commandments are broken, it can't help but leading to wrongs being committed in the last six commandments. When service to God is abandoned, our treatment of fellow humans is bound to deteriorate.

Our world thinks that is exactly opposite to the truth. John Lennon would have us all imagine how wonderful the world would be if we abandoned all those ideas of God. Our world says that extremism of any religious ideal is harmful to the world's good. Our world says we should abandon all serious notions of God. Yet Nazi Germany gave us one of the best examples of what that kind of world would result in.

Jerusalem abandoned true worship of God and committed itself to idol worship.

The result- no justice for people who need justice. No righteousness to be extended to those who need help. No. All that are left now are murderers. Murder

is the greatest example of someone who puts their selfish interest above every other person's interest. To take someone's life for our own selfish interest is the epitome of arrogance and selfishness and rebellion against God.

How sad this would have been. This had once been the center for God's influence on the earth. It represented God's best reflection. These people were faithful. This is probably speaking of the reign of King David and King Solomon. This was a glowing example of justice for the populace. It was an example of Kings and rulers doing the right things (for the most part). But that is no longer the case. Now the leadership is corrupt. Where it once sought to honor God by how it treated the populace, now it seeks its own advantage.

<sup>22</sup> **Your silver has become dross, Your wine mixed with water.**

It would be one thing to say that your silver **has a lot of dross in it**. The dross is the imperfection, the thing that is less than silver. Isaiah is saying that your silver, your redeeming qualities, no longer even exist. The silver has become less than silver. Now your silver, the best thing about you, is the part that one throws away in the search for something of value.

When wine mixes with water, the wine is no longer pure wine, and it never will be again. It is now only a part of what it was. Its value has been diminished and can't be regained.

This is sad. It is just utterly sad. Sin had caused this gem in God's eye to become nothing but an eyesore. There was no longer anything worth saving. The value this city once had is now gone. Who they **once were** they are **no more**.

We started this sermon by looking at what we once were. I hope that we cannot look at our own lives and see this comparison. I hope that we remain committed to any past goodness we may have experienced from God's hand, that we would be willing to repent of any error and pursue a vibrant obedient relationship to God our Father. That we would be faithful to Jesus our husband.

I came across a really good quote used to explain the horror of this passage. It is from a commentary called Preaching the Word.

**Sin promises to spice up our lives, but it dilutes everything. Simone Weil was a French Jewish intellectual who died in England during World War II after putting herself on the rations of her fellow-Frenchmen who were suffering under Nazi occupation. She understood the difference between good and evil: She said-**

**Nothing is so beautiful, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy as the good. No deserts are so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy it is the other way round. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of charm.**



**We need God to tell us the truth, or dreariness will feel exciting and freshness will seem lackluster.**

Preaching the Word - Preaching the Word – Isaiah: God Saves Sinners.

We can't allow ourselves to be seduced into worthlessness. And we can rest assured that is where seduction is headed. That is the goal. The devil wants us useless in the Master's hand, worthless to His cause. He wants us all to become the dross, not the silver. Whatever temptation he has laid in front of you today, that is what he intends for you.

Then Isaiah continues.

<sup>23</sup> **Your princes *are* rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.**

We need to understand where this people who were formally God's example to the world **now sit**. They have abandoned their God. They thought there was a way more to their liking, more satisfying to their flesh. And this is where they end up. What Isaiah is about to show us is what happens when any of us **cease living for God**. We may envision ourselves as good people who are above committing this horrible behavior. But we are not.

Here are the leaders of the people. And how does God categorize them?

Rebellious. These are people who know what is right and wrong, but what they are committed to is **what is in their own selfish interest**. And they will spend anyone to have it.

They are called companions of thieves. Their buddies are crooks, stealing other people's possessions simply because they want them and they can get away with it. It looks like politics has never changed. We see the same thing today in our country. We daily hear about how our leaders have sold out the good of the people for their own personal gain.

**Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.**

Now, if you are in charge of executing justice, of deciding right and wrong in civil and criminal issues, how is the way you can most profit personally from that position? That is easy. Sell your product. Sell the verdict to the highest bidder. And when you do that, what you have left is sure to be injustice. It is the opposite of what you were appointed to do.

That is what we see here. For the right reward, they will abandon the good that **they should be doing** and do the evil **they were appointed to stop**.

These people are for sale.

And who pays the cost? The least of these. Those who have no money and power. The powerless are the litmus test of the morality of those who have money and power. What happens to the powerless reflects the true values of those in power.

Those in leadership in Isaiah's day show what they really are. They are godless and immoral. They will **pay no price** for that which **God** loves. They don't come to the defense of the powerless.

The problem with the Judean rulers and people is that they were living for themselves at the expense of everyone else. God was very hard on them. Their idolatry was a personal offense to God, but idolatry against God always spreads to injustice and cruelty toward mankind. That is the natural outcome of rebellion against God.

Another quote from Motyer

**Everything is subordinate to self interest, so that those who bring their needs rather than their gifts are dismissed without a thought.**

Here is an error for us to avoid. And we think at this point, I would never do such a thing. I would never take a bribe to promote such an injustice.

But what will we do? Our families are the place where we are most likely to exhibit some of the same traits. Will we allow members of our families to commit injustices to other members of our families while we sit on and watch because it would cost us too much to interfere? Fathers, this application is pointed mostly at us because we have the most authority. Will we use our authority even when it will cost us things we value? Is there really anything different from that and taking a bribe? Mothers and fathers, will we apply ourselves to making sure that we deal with the injustices we see rather than turn the other way making sure we don't see the problems?

When we take our responsibilities for the weakest seriously, it will almost always cost us something we hold dear. But it is our job to do so. Just as we who are in leadership at the church must make sure that none of the least of these get treated badly by those who may have more influence and power in our little circles than those who have less. To do the right thing, the just thing, is often costly, no matter how small the application. And it isn't like **it is below us** to show injustice due to pride or selfishness. We need to recognize that it is like every one of us to do such a thing if we do not guard ourselves against it. It is only submission and obedience to God that will ensure our proper attitudes and actions toward the powerless.

I have handed out a list of idolatry questions. It would be good for us to consider this week, what idolatry do I have in my life. What am I trusting to provide me what only God can provide me? Where are my competing gods? This week would be a wonderful time to weed out any competing loves in our lives and renew our commitment to what it once was. Sing Take my life and let it be.