

# The Church Before the Watching World

## “Naming the Gods: Keeping the Church Free from Idols”

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### Scripture Reading

*“We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:4-6 ESV)*

*“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:20-21)*

### **THE ROMANS SET-UP**

“Has the world gone and lost their mind? What is good counts for evil, and what is evil is paraded down the streets as good. We need to protect ourselves. We need to pull our kids out of public school so they won’t be corrupted by the evil out there. We need to form a coalition with other God-fearing people to do some protests and boycotts and we need to do whatever it takes to keep those people from getting away with it. I mean, when evil is this pervasive and all around us, what can the righteous do?”

That is precisely what Paul’s readers were thinking right up to the end of Romans chapter 1.

Paul isn’t just listing things people have occasionally done or said. He is describing a typical day in the life of Rome.

You see the Romans had a story. There were 67 gods to be worshipped, not to mention all the divine demigods. One of those, the god Mars, had twin boys—Romulus and Remus. The wicked king of Alba took the twins and set them adrift in a basket on the river Tiber. They survived with the help of a she-wolf that nursed them to health, and eventually the twins returned to overthrow the king and found the city of Rome. The Roman Caesars saw themselves as incarnations of the divine, awaiting full enthronement upon their death. The Emperor Vespasian's last words on his death bed were "O dear, I think I'm becoming a god!"<sup>1</sup> But that didn't mean you should wait until they died to worship them. The Imperial cult involved images of Caesar, sometimes set up in Jewish holy places, with forced worship. In 9 BC., a young Ephesian etched in stone an inscription for all who visited the city, declaring the beginning of gospel is the story of Caesar. One of the coins that people had in their pockets during the time of Jesus had the image of Caesar Augustus and forming a halo around his head were inscribed the words "Divine Caesar, Son of God."

So when Paul begins to list ways you can know that a culture has chosen new gods, he says imagine if you lived in a culture where they exchange the worship of God for the worship of four-footed beasts. And everybody in Rome would look up from their scroll to see the giant statue of the she-wolf, providing sustenance to Romulus and Remus—the wolf that became the symbolic mother of Rome, part of the story of a different salvation, leading to a different Savior, who went by the name Son of God.

Then Paul moves from idolatry to sex. In a culture where sex was embedded with power, it was quite common for a well-to-do roman leader to have boys, slaves, and even freedmen summoned to his side for whatever sexual fancy filled his head. Let me get real graphic for just a second. When Paul puts pen to paper, the emperor's name was Nero. When Nero's wife died, the official COD was death in childbirth; but rumors swirled almost immediately that Nero kicked her to death. Two years later, Nero found a young slave boy named Sporus, who was said to bear a remarkable resemblance to his first wife. So, Nero castrated Sporus, and then he married him. You heard that right. For the wedding reception, Nero has Sporus dressed up in the wedding dress of a Roman Empress, then standing next to each other in the Royal carriage, they were carried through the streets of Rome, with all the citizens standing on the sidewalks applauding as they passed by.<sup>2</sup>

When Paul says imagine if you lived in a culture where sexual gratification would simply be played out of lusts in their hearts, even changing the natural use, wouldn't everybody suddenly get in their minds a clear picture of their Emperor—the man who declares

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*.

<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 26-31.

himself to be their Savior? Paul begins this whole speech by saying “I’m not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”—but then he describes a manner of life that seemed even to Suetonius—the Roman historian—to be an open shame.

As he rounds the corner and nears the end of that pivotal first chapter, Paul provides a laundry list of vices to describe a corrupt and decaying culture. He lists greed, envy, slander, ruthlessness and deceit—things every Caesar used to take power and become Caesar. Paul lists haughtiness, arrogance, and boastfulness—what better words to describe someone who claims to be a god?!

I can see everybody applauding Paul then, just as so many wish to applaud Paul now—“yes, yes, Paul, speak more about the sins of Rome, of Hollywood and Washington. Speak to the unseemly character out there.” But then, Paul turns the tables on his readers. Remember that long list of vices? Half of them sound just like detestable Caesar (and maybe a president or two in my lifetime). But the other half, lumped together and intertwined with all the others, sound a lot like me.

And then—to people who may very well have lined the streets to see their Caesar come to town; to people who may very well have joined the crowd in clapping their hands as Nero passed through their ranks, Paul says “not only those who do such things are worthy of condemnation and judgment”—watch this now, “but also all those who stand and applaud.”

“Therefore,” begins Paul in the very next verse: “you have no excuse...for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you practice the very same things” (Rom 2:1 ESV).

There’s the set up. Before you even think about lifting a finger in judgment toward the sins of the world, take a good look at yourself!

And I can see the first reader of Paul’s letter to the Romans, peering his head over his outstretched scroll, and, addressing a stunned church, saying, “this is going to be hard to hear.”

## NAMING THE GODS

If Christians were known for one thing, they were known for saying no to every other god. Because the early Christians denied the long pantheon of gods the culture inherited from ancient Greece, and because they refused to bow down to the Imperial cult of

ancient Rome, they were called “atheists.” We were the ones who went to our deaths charged with denying the gods.<sup>3</sup>

As Paul says, for us there is one God who makes himself known to us as “Father, Son, and Spirit.” Christians affirm there is one foundation and source of all that is true and good. In fact, in him we live, and move, and have our being. That is why even ancient Israel could say, “Yahweh, he is the God; there is no other beside him” (Deut 4:35). Monotheism is right. There is nothing else that can hold his place because there is nothing else intrinsically able to rival Yahweh.

But if we pose the question differently—“do people *worship* other gods”—the answer is a resounding yes. In the Bible, we find people (and sometimes whole nations) that would carve their own god out of wood or stone. The prophets use words like “deaf” and “mute” to say these gods or idols are empty, hollow things.

These people weren’t stupid. They knew they had just carved an idol out of wood or stone. But those carved images were stand-ins for something bigger—something dark and sinister. They were reminders to worship something other than God. And it led to disastrous effects. In worship to Marduk, Molech, and Baal, people sent their little children into fiery cauldrons, and engaged in heinous practices that hurt themselves and others. And when this occurs, the Bible shifts its language: the people aren’t just deciding to do wrong things on their own. No, the Bible names the dark and sinister otherworldly forces at work behind, in, and through such evil, using our own selfish inclinations to defy the power of God. After all, there is real evil in the world. Real darkness, seeking to take the place of God.

The Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright says that, in his reading of the Old Testament, gods and idols are (1) things that entice us, (2) things that we fear, (3) things that we trust, and (4) things that we need.<sup>4</sup> The early disciple John gives us his own 3 categories: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” When Jesus faces three temptations in the desert, I can see these categories fitting neatly into those three temptations.

Maybe all of this helps explain why both the Old Testament and the New Testament warn us so severely against idolatry—which is having other gods. Before a watching

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<sup>3</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 556-61; A. N. Sherwin-White, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?—An Amendment,” *Past and Present* 27/1 (April 1964): 23-27.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Here Are Your Gods: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times* (IVP Academic, 2020), p.80.

world, the people of God should be known and defined as those who do not serve or bow down to other gods. In fact, it is the first commandment: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall have no other gods before me.” The New Testament continues the theme. Paul puts it right in the middle of his letter: “My dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). 1 John ends the book with a verse that—for many of us—seemed out of place until now: “My little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:23).

What if idolatry was still around—and as tempting as ever?

Idols aren’t just statues in our houses. *An idol is anything that takes the place in our lives to do or be for us what only God can do or be for us.* Your safety. Your security. Your anchor. Your go-to in difficult moments. Your ultimate allegiance. Your greatest love. Maybe it’s what your flesh craves. Maybe it’s what your eyes crave. Maybe it’s what your prideful spirit craves. But you’ll find them in things that entice us, (2) things that we fear, (3) things that we trust, and (4) things that we need. The Bible challenges us to name our gods. And the first place for us to look is not in Hollywood or Washington. It’s in ourselves.

in Romans chapter 2, Paul carefully chooses 3 examples to do a point-counterpoint intended to challenge our idols that serve as stand-in idolatrous pathways to things that entice us, things that we fear, things that we trust, and things that we think we need. He calls us to name our gods.

## MAMMON

Paul’s first question is this: “While you preach against stealing, do you steal?” (Rom 2:21 ESV). Oh, I doubt most Jewish Christians went around robbing their neighbors blind. And I doubt most good church folk do that today. It’s a metaphor for something deeper—something that entices us, something we crave. Something we see and just have to have.

The first perennial God who challenges YHWH for the throne of our hearts has a name: Mammon. His street name is money, wealth, greed, stuff—the constant desire for more that is the lust of the eye. “You may be sure of this,” says Paul, “a greedy person is an idolater, and he has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph 5:5). To make it clear what we are talking about, the CEB says greed takes over “when things become gods.” To the Colossians, Paul says that if you keep “wanting more and more, you might as well be worshipping statues of gods” (Col 3:5 NIV).

But that's not me, right? We can always think of someone else who seems more wedded to money than I am. I mean, I fast twice a week and put money in the collection plate every Sunday. I'm not like them, right?

More than 37 million Americans live in poverty—that's 11.4% of the population. This includes 1 in every 6 children.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the 26 richest people in the world—together—own as much as the poorest half of the entire world.<sup>6</sup> I want to tell those 26 richest people to give their money away and solve world hunger! But what if we counted up all the Christians in the world—how much could we cover?

When things are really tight, or I'm in a pinch, or I'm scared, or I'm thinking about my future and security (remember—things we fear, things we trust, things we need), how many of us whisper to ourselves “the answer to all my troubles will be found in keeping more of my money and having a few more things”? And oh, how we rationalize. Do we make sure money gets a comfortable seat at the table in every major decision of our lives? Why do you think that is?

Jesus talks about money 10 times more often than he talks about sex. And Jesus calls money a “master” that rivals your heavenly master. And no man can serve two masters. Do you know the name of the two masters? It's God and money. That's why the *Message* translates Matt 6:24 this way: “you can't worship two gods at once...you can't worship God and Money both.”

In 150 AD, a letter written to Diognetus describes us this way:

*“Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs....And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives...They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory.”*

Do you hear what he's saying? Money is not their master. Just look at them.

I try to imagine what the world would take note of, were they to see a people unaffected by the grip of greed. People who thought that income was not owed money to go in my pockets; income was God's gift to allow us to steward his resources for the benefit of those under our care? It's a mindset change. The goal is not to be threadbare and poverty-stricken, as if the external effect of having no money automatically makes us

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.povertyusa.org/facts>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/21/world-26-richest-people-own-as-much-as-poorest-50-per-cent-oxfam-report> .

spiritual. The goal is to not be enslaved by our stuff. No longer enticed, no longer afraid of doing without, no longer trusting in our stuff to provide us security, and no longer thinking that we truly need it. For, as our Savior said, “a man’s life does not consist of the abundance of things he owns” (Luke 12:15).

And yet too often, we can’t afford to be generous. The church must stop speaking of money problems like it’s a personal affair and unrelated to the life of discipleship. This is how we are called to be different from the world. A Christian who can’t afford to be generous has lost sight of our calling.

Mark this down: orthodox Christianity has always maintained that money and materialism bear the name of Mammon: wishing to become our master, Christians renounce the need for and desire of those false idols that claim to provide safety, security, while feeding our greed. Christians were to be known as givers, not hoarders, and that our destitution would remind the world of the naked, exposed, crucified Christ.

Look at our bank accounts, our budgets, our piles of stuff, and our enormously busy schedules. If we can’t afford to be generous, or would feel awful to be so, we have a demon to cast out of our house. We have a god to name.

Paul’s second question is this: “You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” (Rom 2:22 ESV). The second perennial God who challenges YHWH for the throne of our hearts is sex—pleasure resulting from the lust of the flesh. Oh, I doubt most upstanding, God-fearing Jews or Jewish Christians really thought of themselves as adulterers. But God uses that word “adultery” throughout the Old Testament when his people went seeking other gods. And when he was asked if there was any wiggle room that would allow us to break our life-long commitment to fidelity in marriage, Jesus said breaking your covenant is adultery. But it doesn’t stop there. Show me how the average Christian views their love life or their sex life and I’ll show you someone who is in danger of adulterating God’s vision of the family.”

## **EROS**

The second thing we must name in the church is when sex becomes our god. Sex was God’s idea. It’s beautiful and right and good. Sex is to be celebrated and used as an illustration of Christ’s love for the church, and the goodness of creation. There is a whole book in the Bible about it.

But sex is not our god. Or is it? Do you think it’s a coincidence that of all the gods you’ve heard of throughout the years, its fertility gods that get mentioned so often? I

would say it is about as much of a coincidence as the fact that sex is the single most important marker for self-identity in our culture today.

We made several moves, and we should trace this out so that we may learn. The first thing we did was to elevate sexual encounter as the highest form of relationships. We should have known that that can't be true by watching God in the flesh—who taught us how to love more deeply than anyone has ever loved—and he never had sex in his life. But as any single person who has ever applied for a ministry position; ask any widow or divorcee who has wanted to join a fellowship circle made up of more than just other widows or divorcees. And you'll find that in practical terms, if you are not having regular sex, those of us who are just don't really know what to do with you. And we didn't learn that from Jesus.

The second move we made—after elevating sex as the highest form of relationships—is we “pleasurized it.” It became all about how good it feels, and we untethered it from anything having to do with bring children into the world. Now, sex is incredibly pleasurable. I do not agree with the Catholic position that birth control is wrong and that every sexual encounter must allow the possibility of procreation. But I find the Catholic sensibility—the conscientious desire to respect sex for what it is rather than what I want it to be—far superior to what we have now. And when we bemoan the fact that our generation is having fewer and fewer children, and desire fewer and fewer children, don't forget where some of that blame lies.

The third move we made—after prioritizing it and pleasurizing it—is we privatized it. It's “my” sex life, after all. I have seen *Christian* sex help books that actually say “anything you want to do in the bedroom with your spouse is perfectly fine and nobody's business as long as you both consent to it and it doesn't cause permanent damage.” Do you know what that means? Sex is not about God, or creation, or telling a story about God and his good creation. Oh no. Sex is ours. It's a tool for our benefit to be used as we please. When we bemoan the fact that our generation has twisted concepts of sexual experience rooted in one's own devious imagination, or when we see that marriage and fidelity goes out the window the minute we don't like our personal, pleasurable, highest form of good “sex life” anymore, don't forget where some of that blame lies.

Just six days ago, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a headline story about the latest hot invite: “Divorce parties.”<sup>7</sup> “With society widely accepting of broken marriages,” reads the byline, “many newly uncoupled people feel emboldened to throw themselves bashes; ‘End of an error.’”

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/divorce-parties-registries-marriage-1ed745b9>



“For most of history,” continues the article, “divorce hasn’t been an event touted to the world. Now, a culture shift is under way. The U.S. divorce rate has been dipping, but those who get them feel freer to trumpet their breakups. The number of American adults who consider divorce to be morally acceptable has hit historic highs, according to Gallup polls.”

“Divorce used to be something to be ashamed of due to societal pressures and stereotypes,” says the article. “But today people have really decided to nip that societal shame.”

“It was just this feeling of, I’m not ashamed of this,” says Nadine Adamson, a real-estate broker in Manhattan and Brooklyn who had a divorce party. “I think being married for more than 10 years in New York—I was married for 12—is a huge success.”

A person on Reddit posted a photo of an invitation from a divorcing couple that was throwing a joint party. “Plus ones are welcome—ours will be there!” it said.

Christians divorce at the same rate as the rest of the world. I wonder what the stats would say if we were to answer honestly: do we cheat at the same rate? Do we disregard the welfare of our children in the same way?

So is it any wonder that after we prioritized it, pleasurized it, and privatized it, we’d end up in a culture that is willing to pervert it? Sex was a gift within marriage between a man and a woman to bring about children and enjoy togetherness. When sex is outside of marriage, or no longer between a man and a woman, or disconnected from even the concept of children, we turn sex into something it isn’t. And we sow to the wind and reap the whirlwind.

Remember that 2<sup>nd</sup> century letter “Epistle to Diognetus”? Here is the second thing said about the church:

*Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs....And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives....Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. (5)*

Mark this down: orthodox Christianity has always maintained that sex was intended only within marriage, between one man and one woman, for life, that children were to be a primary reason for that union, and that Christians would not participate in the

setting out, exposing, or destroying of their offspring; children were to be welcomed into life and treated with dignity befitting those made in the image of God.

These two—greed and faithless adulterating sexual sin—are the two things singled out throughout the New Testament as “idolatry” (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says not even to associate with a brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy (1 Cor 5:10-11). But then he says, “you know, you can fail to be greedy and fail to be sexually immoral, and still be an idolater.” That brings me to the last question.

Paul’s third question is this: “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” (Rom 2:22 ESV). That question has always perplexed me. Was temple robbing a major problem among first century Jews? It didn’t click in my head until I saw the larger, metaphorical use of the first question—about how seeking riches for ourselves and envying the riches of others is stealing from the goodness of God. Or the second question—that when we turn eros into a god, we commit adultery against our first love. But when you rephrase it to see Paul addressing two common pitfalls—greed and lust—it reframes the third. Temple robbing involves taking not just the spoils, but the gods who live there. When you go chasing after other gods, you are a temple robber. It’s sacrilege—to follow any other power besides Yahweh. That means Rome. That means Babylon. And that means yourself.

## **PRIDE**

It’s when we are obsessed with status, success, and power. Even the Greeks and Romans saw “hubris” as a demon, the sure sign that a fall is coming. Maybe for us it’s Narcissus, the god of a younger Instagram generation, who determines right and wrong by looking in a mirror. They forget that God has determined right and wrong, and his standard challenges what we see in the mirror. Maybe for us it’s Nemesis, the god of an older “pay back” generation who thinks carrying out judgment is somehow our responsibility. They forget that Paul says to live at peace with all people, to repay evil with goodness, and to leave wrath and retaliation to God alone. In both cases—we end up playing the role of God ourselves, because we forget that we are not the accusers or the judges or the standard. As Paul says in Romans 3 “there is none righteous. No not one. There is none who seeks after God. Everyone has turned to their own way.”

I can’t count how many times I’ve let money have a major say or even the final say in decisions in my life. I’ve been guilty of greed, and I repent. Some of you may know that before I met and married Katie, I went through a divorce. I didn’t want it. I fought it. My close friends will testify that I didn’t want it. But I would be a fool to deny that I contributed to it. And I have repented many times for it. And now that I am in a lifetime commitment to Katie, I can think of a hundred ways to be better and to do better. And

when I look in the mirror, I see a god fighting for control. I feel the temptation to draw lines and condemn those on the other side of the line, forgetting that I, too, stand on the same side of the line. I see it, and I repent of it. And when I look in Scripture, I see a story of God who longs to love, save, and redeem Nineveh, to take back his wayward, betraying spouse, and to reform a conscience-driven Saul who is trying to kill Christians. And all my judgmental pride goes out the window as I fall to my knees.

We don't need an opportunity. We don't need an opening. We don't need a platform. We don't need an audience. We don't need likes. We don't need people to influence. We need a savior!

The Church is called to be different. God has commissioned his people. We are under orders to be a signpost of the kingdom in this world. And the first thing we must do is surrender up all our other gods.

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people,” writes Paul, “It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

Before you even think about lifting a finger in judgment toward the sins of the world, take a good look within and clean up the mess in your own backyard!

Judgment is for insiders. Paul tells the Corinthians, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside” (1 Cor 5:11 NIV). “For it is time,” says Peter, “for judgment to begin with God’s household” (1 Peter 4:17 NIV)

Clean the inside of the cup. Pick up your own backyard. Or to use the language of our day, “Get right church and let’s go home.”

## **REFORM BEGINS WITH ME**

Christopher Wright, in a speech that shook the earth with righteous indignation, spoke to a crowd of church leaders in Cape Town South Africa. He told them this:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Christopher Wright, “Plenary 2: Confronting Idols,” Cape Town 2010: The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ57kCNQ6oQ&ab\\_channel=LausanneMovement](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ57kCNQ6oQ&ab_channel=LausanneMovement)

500 years ago, the bishop's cloaks were lined with money, and their hearts thirst for power. They were exploiting the poor and robbing poor widows by selling them trinkets to set their dead loved ones free from misery and to secure their place in the heavenly court. And all this while the average person sat in the pew completely ignorant of the power of the Word, for the Bible was never preached from, and the only ones available were chained to pulpits, written in a language no longer spoken by the people.

In that desperate hour, God brought forth a reformation as his voice thundered from the printing press: Get right church, and let's go home.

Maybe it's time for another reformation. When the most popular religious leaders are nothing more than political operatives, bursting with pride and hungry for power. When the gospel is re-packaged and sold as a diet or retirement plan, appealing to our greed as the way to find health, wealth, and your best life now, the bleeding face of the Son of God stares at us from the cruel cross and says, "have you lost your minds?" And all the while the average seeker sits in the pew ignorant of the God who calls them to discipleship because the preachers have exchanged the call to take up our cross with 5 simple ways to carve a god in your very own image.

We need a return to the Lord. We need to Repent and believe the gospel.

Before we go out into the highways and hedges, let us come back to the Lord our God. Before we seek to change our neighbors, our country, or our world, let us beg for God to cleanse our churches.

Before we share a word of the gospel with a lost and dying world, let us speak words of confession before Almighty God.

Let us get off our seats and get on our knees and cry "give us clean hands; give us pure hearts. Take every idle word, every idle thought, and every idol that gets in the way. Take it all and give me Jesus."