

American Idols: The gods of This Age

Before Jesus launched his public ministry, the Holy Spirit forcefully led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. When Satan came to tempt him, Jesus had fasted forty days in the wilderness wastes of the Negev. He was weak, and humanly speaking, vulnerable. The Gospels record three specific temptations.

Matthew describes the third temptation this way: "...the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'"

Think about that for a moment. Was that a legitimate offer? Do all the kingdoms of this world and all their splendor belong to Satan? We might have expected Jesus to say something like this: "All the kingdoms of the world and their splendor are not yours to give, Satan. You can't offer what you don't possess."

What did Jesus say: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Mt. 4:8-10).

Jesus didn't rebuke Satan for making an empty offer because Satan does own title to the kingdoms of this world. Paul calls him "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). The Apostle John affirms "...the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

The Bible portrays Satan as a ruler with a kingdom. His legions—those fallen spirits called "the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12)—constitute a shadow government that dominates the course of life on this planet. When the Bible uses the term "world," it is usually describing a system dominated by the will and the ways of the Evil One.

Before we came to faith in Jesus, we were part of that system, spiritually alienated from God, blinded by Satan and, like everyone else, devoted to the ways of this world. The Bible describes our pre-Christian state this way: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Eph. 2:1-2).

But now we have been rescued from Satan's kingdom. By our new birth we have been given membership in God's family and citizenship in Christ's Kingdom. As a result we receive these warnings:

- "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).
- "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2:15-16).

In the view of the Bible, this whole vast enterprise we know as our world, with all of its governments, cultures, entertainments, philosophies, religions, is run by a spiritual Mafia, a rebellious, spiritual infra-structure led by Satan in his defiance against the one true God. Christ-followers have been called out of this to lead a counter-insurgency, advancing God's Kingdom and gospel through the church.

Let's put this in the context of our current series, *American Idols*. In this world, Satan offers us counterfeits for every good thing God created. In this world, for instance, lust supplants love, possessions and achievement define worth, how we look matters more than who we are.

Satan even has spiritual counterfeits to fill the “infinite abyss” in our souls that we talked about last week, the God-shaped vacuum in every heart. Satan offers idols, false gods, each uniquely to the longings and aspirations of every culture. The Bible says “...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God” (1 Cor. 10:20).

Demonic power lies behind our idols. Even the idols of our hearts.

We began last week a series we’re calling *American Idols*. It is a four part examination of the counterfeit gods that threaten to displace our love for and loyalty to the one true God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We said last week that while we may not have cast images or carved figures on our shelves or in our shrines, we all cherish what Ezekiel called “idols of our hearts.” The human heart is a veritable idol factory, the identities of which may be discerned by discovering what it is that we love ultimately, fear, trust, and serve. These are all offerings of our hearts designed to find their highest, truest expression toward God. But because of sin, we refuse to acknowledge our Creator and choose lesser gods, gods we think are more manageable.

This week we want to think about the heart-idols of our American culture, those things that are uniquely suited to the American experience. What counterfeit gods does Satan offer that are culturally identifiable and powerful enough to seduce our affections away from the God of the Bible?

We can only begin to suggest a few. Many have noted the unholy trinity of American idolatry consisting of money, sex, and power. In their raw form, that is undoubtedly correct. These offer us a kind of security, a source of immediate pleasure and a false sense of control. But the enemy of our souls massage these into counterfeit gods that are more subtle, more seductive.

For instance, in his perceptive book, *The Trouble With Paris*, Mark Sayers has a chapter titled “Hyperconsumerism As Religion.” He writes: “We worship at the mall, buying products as if they were magic amulets; we place our hope and faith in vacations and SUVs to make us happy; and we work and save and borrow to reach the consumer version of heaven—the lifestyle we dream about.”

This false religion has a gospel preached by the gurus of advertising. It used to be that advertisers tried to convince us of the utility or the quality of their products. Not anymore. Now companies are selling things as means to satisfy deep longings in our hearts.

For instance, Kevin Roberts is CEO of Satchi & Satchi: The Lovemarks Company. As an advertising agency, he says products need to go beyond branding to achieve what he calls lovemarks: “Lovemarks sit on the shoulders of respect [utility and quality] and surge past brands because of their Mystery, Sensuality and Intimacy.”

Lovemarks are best discovered in stories. For instance, Roberts sites his experience with one of his clients, Lexus: “When we asked for some stories they overwhelmed us. About the little girl born in a Lexus named Isabella Lexus. A guy survives a terrible car crash in his Lexus, and connects it with being around to see his 18-month-old baby grow up.”

You are no longer selling reliable transportation. You are selling deep emotional connections with cars, that link our Lexus with our most cherished family hopes and dreams. Such connections stir up auras of mystery, sensuality and intimacy. So he counsels clients: “1: Pump up emotion.”

And we’re buying. A Wal-mart ad features a woman who is so distraught by her living room, that she goes to Wal-mart for a complete make over. Then she joyously announces how thrilled she will be to have her friends over.

By the way, Oprah must have picked up on this. On her web site we get a promo for an

upcoming show: "Linda and Scott's living room isn't just neutral. It's colorless. What's more, the couple can't agree on a decorating scheme. He's high-tech (he has eight remotes!) and she likes the French country look. They've put their trust in Oprah, who now faces the test: Can she find everything to make their room over at Wal-Mart?" (Oprah.com)

What's Wal-mart selling? Quality products at reasonable prices? No, a new look that can reconcile marriages and give you confidence to entertain your friends.

So a credit report company pitches a garage band lead singer who can't get girls because he didn't check his credit before buying a car and cell phone. He ends up with a clunker car and a dinosaur phone and all the girls make fun of him. Checking your credit report can make you a chick-magnet.

All of these illustrate what Sayers calls the world of hyper-reality. It is a fantasy world, a simulated existence which is out there, just beyond our reach. We could enjoy it if we just bought a little bit more of the right stuff.

I have a Cabelas credit card that I use to pay for just about everything. I pay the balance every month so I never pay interest. And Cabelas gives me back one percent of everything I spend as Cabela bucks which I can use to buy stuff at their store in Dundee.

If you've ever been there you know that store isn't just about sporting goods. It's billed as a tourist destination. They have live sport fish in monster tanks, and giant trout in an artificial stream. The stream flows out of a mountain inhabited by full body mounts of every game species in North America. When we go there sometimes we joke about making pilgrimage to Cabelas.

That's the language of religion. We aren't buying fishing lures and rifle scopes. We're buying the mysterious aura of the great American sportsman. We're shaping our identities.

Money can be an idol in its own right, but in America we use it to serve the gods and goddesses of consumerism. We think we can fill up the empty places in our souls by buying the next great thing.

Mark Sayers adds: "If we are to define religion as the worldview and beliefs that determine our identity, actions and hope, then hyperconsumerism is the biggest church in town. Sadly, we find Christianity relegated to just another consumer choice, another lifestyle option."

Another false god is hyper-sensuality, or hyper-sexuality. Paul talked about this in Romans 1 when he described the consequences of our refusal to acknowledge our Creator. God gave them up, Paul says, to shameful lusts. He describes a kind of same sex behavior that is more truly hypersexuality. People in love with sensuality want to experiment with new sensations because sex has become another idol of their hearts. So they dabble in same-sex relations, having sated themselves with heterosexual pleasure.

Dr. Oz had a program recently in which he invited high school girls to talk about teen sexuality on camera with their mothers. During the course of the show he expressed shock to discover that many teens had already become bored with "ordinary" sexual experiences and were trying risky behaviors in order to experience a new sexual high. It's a Romans 1 kind of hyper-sexuality all over again.

Think about how the messages concerning sexuality come to us in our culture. For instance, how are women portrayed in rap videos? What is the expected outcome of a good date in a typical sit-com? Remember when a first kiss didn't involve tongues? And remember what commercials were like before we met Bob?

It's not enough to be attractive anymore. We've got to be sexy.

This isn't just another fundamentalist rant against human sexuality. Sex was God's idea

and he gave it to humankind as a wonderful, joyous gift to serve the intimacy of committed married partners.

In our culture, we have endowed the gift with god-like powers to make our lives rich with meaning and pleasure. We make hyper-sensuality a heart idol. We love it; we fear it; we trust it to deliver; and we serve it.

Satan offers us many other gods unique to America. Power has always been big here. Bertrand Russell observed the addictive seduction of power when he wrote: "Power is sweet; it is a drug, the desire for which increases with habit."

Freedom has progressed from being an inalienable right to a false idol. Think of the pro-choice movement, willing to sacrifice "products of conception" on the altar of personal freedom. We want very much for authorities of every kind to keep their hands and eyes off our lives and our stuff.

You get the drift. These and many other options lie open to us. They seduce us with illusions of security, acceptance, control, pleasure and satisfaction. We love them because they promise life. We fear them because they expose us to shame and rejection when they let us down. We trust them to deliver. And we obey the demands they place on our lives—we serve them.

Each and every one of these things that occupy a place in the American pantheon have good and right purposes we can appropriately use and enjoy. We can be thankful that we have stores full of good, safe products where we can satisfy both necessities and aesthetics. We can be grateful that God has given us bodies that delight in our senses: sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell. Power is a gift when it is used to serve others.

But when energized by the Evil One as ultimate powers, they become idols that will seduce us away from our love for and trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

If you took the time to do some cultural analysis, what might you add to your own list of America's cultural idols. What goes into our pantheon? When do you discern unholy spiritual energy animating their appeal? And which of them do you find most alluring?

Next week, we want to turn our attention to ourselves. Can we identify the idols that are uniquely tantalizing to us individually?