

1 THESSALONIANS 1:8-10

“TURNING FROM TOYS”

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Children enjoy playing with toys... That's why parents enjoy giving toys to their children... But well meaning parents should beware! For certain toys pose a danger to their children if the toy is abused or misused...

Toys with tiny parts can choke a small child if they're swallowed...

Toys with ropes, or strings, or elastic bands can strangle a child...

Toys with sharp edges can puncture and wound...

Toys with a fluffy or billowy texture can suffocate a small child...

Toys that travel fast, like bikes and rollerblades, can lead to nasty falls...

It's ironic, but the very toys that are invented and intended for a child's enjoyment - *if not handled properly* - can actually cause harm to a child. You'd think that when children grow up and become adults we would no longer need to worry about the child and their toys... but not so quick! Toys can be just as dangerous for adults as they are for kids... *A man's toys, a woman's treasures* – can pose considerable risk to a person's spiritual health and eternal destiny. *Let me alert you... Your relationship with God can be affected by how you handle toys.* Items meant for your enjoyment can cause you serious harm. Beware of your toys!

It may surprise you, but how we see our toys is a direct reflection on our attitude and beliefs about God. *Toys reveal our theology!* A few years ago I ran across a comparison of various religions and their approach to toys.

Materialism – *He who dies with the most toys, wins.*

Catholicism - *He who denies himself the most toys, wins.*

Anglican - *They were our toys first.*

Greek Orthodox - *No, they were OURS first.*

Islamic Fundamentalists - *He who dies exploding his toys, wins.*

Atheism - *There is no toy maker.*

Polytheism - *There are many toy makers.*

Evolutionism - *The toys made themselves.*

Church of Christ, Scientist - *We are the toys.*

Communism - *Everyone gets the same number of toys, and you are in big trouble if we catch you selling yours.*

B'Hai - *All toys are just fine with us.*

Amish - *Toys with batteries are a sin.*

Mormonism - *Every boy can have as many toys as he wants.*

Voodoo – *Let me borrow that doll for a second.*

Hinduism - *He who plays with bags of plastic farm animals, loses.*

7th Day Adventist - *He who plays with his toys on Saturday, loses.*

Southern Baptist - *If your toy is a Disney product, you lose.*

Church of Christ - *He whose toys make music, loses.*

Jehovah's Witnesses - *He who sells the most toys door-to-door, wins.*

Pentecostalism - *He whose toys speak in an unknown language, wins.*

Existentialism - *Toys are a figment of your imagination.*

Agnosticism – *No one really knows whether toys make any difference.*

My point is you can tell a lot about a person's attitude toward God by how they handle their toys. And this is what Paul says about the Thessalonians. They turned to Jesus by turning away from their toys!

As we learned last week in 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul commends the believers in Thessalonica for being model Christians. He vividly recalls their “**work of faith**,” and “**labor of love**,” and “**patience of hope**.” They considered each other as “**beloved brethren**.” And even though they received the Gospel amidst fierce persecution, their affliction couldn't dampen the joy they'd received from the Holy Spirit. In fact, news of what was happening among them had spread to the surrounding regions. The Thessalonians had gained a reputation. Paul didn't have to brag on these believers, their vibrant faith spoke for itself.

And everyone noted their attitude toward their toys. They “**turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven...**” They turned **their back to their toys**, and **their face to God's Son**. Here's the last entry on my list of religions and their attitude toward toys, “**Christianity – He who turns from his toys to Jesus, wins for all eternity.**” To be a true Christian – to really know God and walk with God – you first have to turn from your toys. Certainly, God is a Dad who loves His kids. He made all things for our enjoyment. The Bible says “**every good and perfect gift comes... from the Father.**” But just like a toy in the hands of a child, even a good gift can be dangerous if handled improperly.

God has made every human a worshipper. It's within the basic nature of all humans to *latch on* and *look up* to something greater than themselves. *Everybody worships somebody* - or some thing... *We can't not worship*. Thus, when mankind rejected God's authority, and struck out on his own, he needed to find a substitute – another object he could worship.

God is Spirit. That makes Him immortal, eternal, *invisible*. Sin caused man to die spiritually. Sin destined man to life on the visible, tangible plain. That left him to lust after a god he could see, and touch, and feel. The invisible God chose to reveal Himself through ideas and words. Through the *written Word*, the Bible - and the *living Word*, His Son. But man chose *images over words*. He wanted gods he could see instead of the invisible God. He carved gods out of wood and forged gods out of metal. The ancient world was proliferated with idols and images.

The Bible teaches that the true God made man in His own image and likeness. God's plan was to reveal Himself tangibly - but through the hands and feet of His people. Ultimately, He did this through the God-man, Jesus. But fallen man didn't want to be a reflection of the invisible

God. Instead of a *reflection*, He wanted to be *the reflector*. He wanted glory for himself. So rather than live as God's image, man fashioned gods after his own fallen likeness. Pagan gods reflected sinful man's desires and dreams.

The ancient gods were an exaggeration of both the best and worst of humanity. Gods and goddesses were the magnification of human power and beauty, but they also reflected our lusts, and jealousy, and vengeance. A prideful world rejected the true God, and worshipped themselves - by customizing gods after their own image. *Idolatry is the height of rebellion.*

This is why few sins arouse the angst and ire of God more than idolatry.

When God debut His Top Ten List, His number one concern was, "You shall have no other gods before Me." Later, when God judged the Hebrews it was because of their idolatry... He says in 1 Kings 16:13 "(they provoked) the LORD God of Israel to anger with their idols." Ezekiel 20:16 explains why Jerusalem was ransacked - "for their heart went after their idols." And in case we're inclined to relegate idolatry to the OT, 1 Corinthians 10:14 warns, "My beloved, flee from idolatry." As does 1 John 5:21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." God has always despised idolatry.

Of course I know what you're thinking, "Okay idolatry is despicable. I agree. If I were God I'd be ticked off too. But what does idolatry have to do with me? I've got no wooden statues on my mantle - you'll find no shrines or icons sitting on my nightstand. Isn't idolatry an ancient problem?" Make that assumption, and you've made a potentially fatal mistake. Even in modern times idols abound. We probably live in history's most idolatrous time. Millions of people today are trapped in a snare of idolatry.

Hinduism holds to over 330 million gods and goddesses - more than 8 idols per household. There's enough beef in Indian to feed the entire continent, but it can't be harvested because cows are considered sacred. *And holy cow*, monkeys and rats get the same treatment. Rodents are allowed to ravage crops. They're *worshipped* rather than *exterminated*.

There're also people throughout the Far East who worship a chubby little image called the Buddha. Every year 100,000 Buddhists flock to Sri Lanka to pay homage to the Buddha's tooth - it's on display in the Temple of the Tooth. It reminds me of the wife who snuggled up real close to her husband. She was in a frisky mood... She whispered in his ear, "Baby, you have the body of a god!" Then she laughed and said, "Yep, you look like a Buddha."

Idolatry also exists among the disciples of Rome. There are Catholics who bow before statues of the Virgin. They direct their prayers to icons and relics, believing them to hold supernatural power. New Age patrons wear their crystals, and sleep under pyramids, trusting inanimate objects to infuse them with spiritual life and energy and healing. There's even a group in Denver, Colorado known as "The Church of the Risen Elvis." They've enshrined an Elvis Pressley doll above an altar, *adorned with candles and flowers*. They chant Elvis' name - and pray to Elvis - and hold special services whenever there's an Elvis sighting. Imagine, all this for a guy who said of himself, "*I ain't nothing but a hound dog!*" My point is, even in modern times, idolatry is alive and well. Yet, you may still feel as if this issue is a million miles from where you live. You're reasoning, "Well, I'm in no danger of idolatry"... but think again.

DL Moody once said, "You don't have to go to heathen lands today to find false gods. America is full of them. Whatever you love more than God is your idol." Arthur Wallis put it this way, "An idol may be defined as any person or thing that has usurped in the heart the place of pre-

eminence that belongs to the Lord.” Perhaps Billy Graham said it best, “Whatever you love most, be it sports, pleasure, business, or God – that is your god.” Idolatry today is more subtle – *but it’s every bit as lethal.*

The gods we’re prone to follow go by a more innocuous name. We’d never come out and call them “*gods*” or “*idols*.” We just call them “*toys!*” But remember, toys can be dangerous if handled improperly. All kinds of seemingly harmless *items* can be turned into a god. Whatever pushes Jesus off the top shelf - whatever captures your imagination, and attention, and rivals your affections for Jesus - is a toy that’s been taken too far. If we’re not careful an *item* can become an *idol*.

Take for example **possessions**... You might scoff at the thought of idolatry. Inspect the china cabinet and coffee table – *no idols in my house!* But let’s look in the garage, or golf bag, or gun case, or jewelry box, or wine rack, or bank account... Idolaters today can *drive*, or *wear*, or *sip*, or *play*, or *polish* their idol... In 1 Timothy 6:17 Paul tells us that “*God... gives us richly all things to enjoy...*” – but we’re not to worship *anything* but Him.

Please, don’t slough off my warnings as if it could never apply to you. Remember the fly that landed on the flypaper... The fly boasted, “*my flypaper*” - while the flypaper said, “*my fly*.” Material possessions have a way of possessing us. They grab a part of us, and jerk us from Jesus. Billionaire Ross Perot once said, “*If you make a lot of money, if you go out and buy a lot of stuff – it’s going to break... Go to any yacht basin in the world. Nobody’s smiling, and I’ll tell you why. Something broke that morning. The generator is out; the microwave won’t work... things don’t mean happiness.*” We accumulate a lot of stuff thinking it’ll better our life, but after a while we find ourselves living just to keep the *stuff* up to *snuff*. What’s supposed to bring *enjoyment* often ends up an *enslavement*.

Possessions can become an idol, as can **people**. Human relationships can take precedent over our relationship with God. When a friend, or spouse, or sweetheart grows more important to us than God she’s an idol. Once a young man made an idol out of what he thought would be the perfect wife. He made an *idol* out of an *ideal*. He never had time to serve the Lord, because he spent all his energy searching for the ideal woman... This is how he described her: “*Always cheerful. Could’ve married movie stars, but wanted only me. Hair that never needs curlers or a beautician. Beauty that won’t run in a rainstorm. Never sick, just allergic to jewelry and fur coats. Insists that moving furniture by herself is good for her figure. Expert in cooking, cleaning, car repairs, and house painting. Favorite hobbies: mowing the lawn and shoveling snow. Hates charge cards. Her favorite statement: ‘What can I do for you, dear?’ Wishes I would go out with the boys more often. And she loves me because I’m so sexy.*”

Well, I think we all can agree there’s no such person... Yet when you look to a another human being to meet needs in your life only God can fill - you’re destined for the same kind of disappointment. I hope no one in your life is as important to you as Jesus. No one will ever love you the way He loves you. Not your child... not your spouse...

I always wanted my kids to know I loved them more than anything else in my life, *but God*. My kids needed to know they were *not supreme*. It’s healthy for them to realize they take a backseat to God. A parent’s love for his kids should always play second fiddle to his allegiance to God. When you make a child your idol you bestow on him or her an unnatural importance. *You harm your child and insult your God.*

Popularity can also become a god. Selfish ambition, the lust for fame, people's approval, esteem in the eyes of others – drives some people. I read an interview once with Madonna. She admitted, "Even though its not suppose to matter, it does matter what people think. Each performance I try my best to show everybody that I did make something out of my life." Some folks live for the cheers of the crowd. They've idolized popularity.

Position too can become an idol. The *rock star lives for applause*, while the *businessman lives for achievement*. Life for him is the next rung on the ladder. He lives to close the deal. Success and its trappings are his god. When I studied management at Georgia State the definitive work on business success was a book called "In Search For Excellence" by Tom Peters. Fast-forward 30 years... Recently I read a disturbing quote by Tom. Peters says, "The cost of excellence is the giving up of family vacations, Little League games, birthday dinners... We have a number of friends whose marriages crumbled under the weight of their devotion to a dream. We are frequently asked if it is possible to 'have it all' – a fully satisfying personal life and a fully satisfying hard working one. Our answer is *No*."

And Jesus agrees, "You cannot serve God and mammon." But it's a cruel god who forces you to pursue an excellence that's relationally bankrupt. Make Jesus God and all of life falls into proper place.

Some folks turn work into a god, while other people "live for the weekend." They exalt **pleasure** and leisure as their idol... *What movie is playing? What tickets can we get? How many days until the next vacation?* They'll seek and serve Jesus *when there's nothing else to do...*

A **philosophy** can also become an idol. How many good people have gotten caught up in an ideology, or movement, or cause? It can be a noble, worthwhile cause like *world peace*, or *save the whales*, or *kick out the incumbents*... but if our involvement rivals our loyalty to Jesus - or distracts us from Him – we've taken it too far. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Men are idolaters, and want something to look at and kiss and hug and throw themselves down before; they always did, they always will; and if you don't make it out of wood, you must make it out of words." Even an *ideal* can be turned into an *idol*.

Again, please don't underestimate this... *We're all prone to idolatry*. This is why Paul marveled at the Thessalonians. How they "turned from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven." God has given us all things to enjoy! Like a good parent He knows His kids like to play with toys. But beware! Toys pose a danger when they're handled improperly. Whether it's a **possession, person, popularity, position, pleasure, or philosophy**... even a good thing can devolve into an idol. Paul Tillich writes, "Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy." Real worship keeps life in proper proportion, whereas idolatry blows up lesser stuff. *Do you love the Blesser more than His blessings?*

Here's what impressed Paul, the Thessalonians were Greeks who had formerly worshipped a pantheon of gods. He knew the great danger was to think they could add Jesus to their already long list of gods and goddesses. "Oh, we worship Zeus, and Aphrodite, and Apollo, and Jesus." But the Thessalonians knew it was one or the other. If Jesus is not *Lord of all*, He is not *Lord at all*. Jesus demands top billing. He is nobody's co-star. Jesus doesn't come to *take sides*, He always comes to *take over*.

Here's a common, but critical error - Jesus isn't an add-on, or a spiritual supplement. His goal isn't to accentuate the life you already have planned. Understand who Jesus is... Paul says in verse 10, "**whom (God) raised from the dead...**" Don't think Jesus overcame death, hell, and

the grave to be a *plug in* – a software patch that makes your current life run smoother. Jesus comes to create a brand new life - to *overhaul* and *overwhelm!*

Paul identifies Him, “*even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” Jesus died on *Calvary*... then rose again to become the *cavalry*. Later Paul talks about “*the great escape.*” Before God’s judgment comes down, the Church goes up. One day, Jesus will ride on the clouds to snatch up believers from all over the globe. We call this event, “*the rapture.*” Afterwards He’ll unleash God’s terrible wrath on the wicked world. But here’s Paul’s point, don’t think this Mighty Jesus will ever be satisfied as a minority partner. Don’t offer Him partial ownership. For Jesus it’s all or nothing. Jesus refuses to be an accessory in anybody’s wardrobe.

What if I came to Kathy one day and suggested we modify our marriage vows, “*Honey, let’s be married on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. But on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday I’m going to play the field.*” If you know my wife... *she’d drop me with one punch!* Marriage doesn’t work that way. You pledge yourself to your spouse for every moment of every day – *or not at all!* And this is how a relationship with Jesus works. *He’s the Lord!*

Churches today are full of folks cruising through life - doing just fine, living the American dream - yet the hole in their life keeps nagging them... So they come to church - get spiritual once a week - they try to silence the rumble. *But they’re not really interested in surrendering control of anything.* They see Jesus as a helpful APP that’ll make their life easier. And these are the folks today who are in greatest danger of idolatry!

I know people who want their sins forgiven. They relish God’s favor and blessing. They especially desire a home in heaven. But until they get there they’re stubbornly determined to do *whatever and however they please!* These are the people who are headed for a rude awakening.

Salvation is no charge! We come to Jesus freely, but we can’t come dragging a bag of idols. *Jesus refuses to save a man He cannot command.* The only cost to you for salvation is whatever you’re clutching in your hand. To take hold of Jesus’ hand you’ve got to empty yours first. You’ve got to decide that what you’re holding – *a possession, or person, or pleasure...* It isn’t worth missing out on Jesus! In fact, it might still be there after you embrace Him, *and Jesus will show you its proper place.*

Today’s pseudo-Christian has divided his life up like a pizza. There’s a family slice, a work slice, a hobby slice, a sex life slice, a money slice, a leisure time slice, a religious slice. Jesus gets relegated to the religious slice – He’s in charge of Sunday mornings - while the person remains free to manage the rest of the pizza any way he or she chooses... Fool yourself if you like, but Jesus isn’t buying this pizza. Jesus is like the cheese that covers and flavors the whole pizza. *I might as well say it, Jesus is the Big Cheese!* He’s not a partner. He’s Sole Proprietor. Becoming a Christian means coming under new management.

The Thessalonians turned from toys to serve God and to wait on His Son from heaven. This past Thursday Kathy came home from the pastors wives conference in California, and all day Wednesday *I waited on her...* That doesn’t mean I sat on the couch and twiddled my thumbs. *I waited on her* – I got ready for her return. I did my dishes and laundry. I cleaned up the yard. I even bothered to shave. *If I want a kiss, I can’t be bristly.* I spent the whole day in eager anticipation. What impressed Paul about the Thessalonians wasn’t just the way they turned from the wrong gods - but the way they embraced the true God. They longed for Jesus. They waited, looking to see Him every day.

If you hear nothing else today, hear this... Whatever a man's idol happens to be - whether *a possession, a person, popularity, a position, a pleasure, a philosophy* - nothing makes for a better god, than the real God! Jesus is the one *possession* worth having - He gives rather than takes. He's the *person* who can reach deep inside you and draw out the best. Who needs *popularity* with men, when you become somebody in Christ. And there is no more powerful a *position* than to *reign with Jesus forever and serve Him right now...* Jesus provides real soul-satisfying *pleasure*... He supersedes all *philosophies*, and causes, and movements. Jesus will shine when all other stars have faded. He is the hope of glory!

When Nancy Kerrigan skated in the 94 Olympic Games her mother had to press her nose against a television screen to see her daughter perform. Nancy's mom was nearly blind. She could barely make out the beautiful figure of her daughter and the elegant lines of her magnificent skating. A news reporter asked Mrs. Kerrigan what she could see... "*Well, I see some shapes, some color, and some movement when she jumps.*" Then the mother finally burst out into tears. Sobbing uncontrollably she told the reporter, "*But I can't see her face. I can't see my daughter's face...*"

This is how the Thessalonians felt about Jesus. They could see His hand at work – they recognized the silhouette of His presence. They could trace God's movements behind the scenes, but they couldn't see His face. And this is my dilemma. I see dimly. This is why I'm waiting for God's Son from heaven. The longing of my heart is to see Jesus face to face. I love the old hymn, "*Thou, O Christ, are all I want; more than all in Thee I find.*" Here's the kind of God you want... *more than all in You I find!* As another man put it, "*I have never met a soul who has set out to satisfy the Lord Jesus and has not been infinitely satisfied himself.*"

Jesus wants all the broken pieces of your life so He can put them back together to make a healthy whole. *How can He do His job if you hold back a piece or two?* Jesus is calling us to turn from our toys to wait on His Son! Here's today's big idea, "*You don't come to God toting your toys.*" Like any father, God loves to give good gifts to His kids, but toys can be dangerous... Let's make sure we worship *the Giver* and *never the gifts.*