

The Foundation of Our Faith is God Himself

The idolatry of worshiping the right God the wrong way

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, December 20, 2020
PASSAGES	Psalm 115:2-8; Exodus 20:3-5; Deuteronomy 4:15-16; Deuteronomy 12:2-4; Deuteronomy 12:29-30; Judges 17:5-13; 1 Samuel 4:3-11; Matthew 12:11; 2 Samuel 12:1-6; Romans 9:3; 1 John 5:21; Matthew 7:24-27
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:05:05 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

There is no guarantee next year will be better, so build on the only firm foundation: God as he really is. Israel's neighbors had gods you could see, with mouths that could not speak; Israel's God could not be seen, and spoke. God forbade even images of himself and told Israel not to worship him however they liked. The most dangerous idolatry today is the same: the right God, remade to suit us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Truth is better comfort than sugar-coating. When you feel disoriented, you want to grab what is real.
- ◆ Idols are visible, impressive and custom-made, but they cannot speak, see or hear – and those who trust them become like them, spiritually blind and deaf.
- ◆ The second commandment is not a repeat of the first. It forbids making images of the true God, because any image diminishes his glory.
- ◆ God tells Israel not to worship him the way the nations worshiped their gods. He gets to say how he is worshiped, so that the nations will know what he is really like.
- ◆ Loving your spouse, your job or your countrymen a great deal is not idolatry in itself.

- ◆ The hardest idolatry to spot is worshiping Jesus while deciding for ourselves what he is like – the passive-aggressive boss, the “Mr. Clean” for sin, the sweet, naive grandfather.
- ◆ Take Jesus seriously and holistically: read all of Scripture as a student, and ask God where you have made an idol of him.

► 1:05:05

With six children and a candlelit Christmas Eve service ahead – “for me the scariest service of the year... after we blow out the candles, literally every year I’m like, oh God, thank you” – Matt opened with a sobering thought: “There’s no guarantee next year is going to be any better.”

Trees, and foundations

► 1:07:40

Two weeks earlier he had called Hope Chapel a tree planted by a river, sustained in and out of season by God’s faithfulness more than its own – with the warning that you cannot drag a great tree across the desert and expect it to stay strong. This week was a related picture: foundations. Even in a normal year you want to build on the right one. He thanked the worship team, Wes and Evan for doing youth ministry in a coronavirus year, and the children’s ministry leader who had run classes in wagons, a building across the street now being torn down, a church down the road, and Geno’s office. “God is good. He can sustain us through all these things.”

► 1:10:03

The firm foundation is God as he is. A foundation of sand is some kind of idolatry: God as he isn’t, a false hope. Why talk about that in an anxious season? “Because the truth is always better than sugar-coated stuff.” If someone gives Matt sugar-coated feedback just to make him feel better, he does not ask them again. “I like it when someone gives me, here’s what I really think.” (Then two robot jokes from a text – “Silicone carne” – which he admitted were both really bad.)

1. Gods you can see, and a God who speaks

► 1:11:59

“Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”

PSALM 115:2-8 ↗

► 1:12:42

Why would the nations taunt Israel? Their gods were right there in a shrine – gold-covered, youthful, strong, custom-made to suit their needs. Matt thought of Michael Scott in *The Office* proposing a monkey’s head with reindeer antlers and a porcupine’s body. More seriously: a bull’s body with a lion’s head for strength; a frog, since frogs live on land and water, “so our god’s versatile”; a duck that walks, floats and flies. And Israel? “What’s in there, an empty room?”

► 1:14:42

But the idols cannot do anything: a big mouth that never opens, ferocious teeth, glorious wings that cannot fly, ears pointed as if listening – “but it’s just stone, it’s just metal.” And “those who make them become like them”: trusting idols makes you spiritually blind and deaf. Israel’s comfort was not something in your face, just what you wanted. “Our God is in heaven; he does what pleases him. But the comfort of it is that he’s really there. You can’t see a mouth, but he can really speak. You can’t see his ears, but he can really hear.”

2. Not even an image of me

► 1:16:31

“You shall have no other gods before me. 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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.”

EXODUS 20:3-5 ↗

► 1:17:05

The first commandment is monotheism. The second is not a redundancy, “where God didn’t explain himself very well.” Baal, Asherah and Marduk are already out. Within the worship of the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he says: do not make carved images. Deuteronomy gives the reason:

► 1:18:14

“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure.”

DEUTERONOMY 4:15-16 ↗

► 1:18:55

The figure in question is not Baal; it is Yahweh. “You don’t know what I look like. You didn’t see anything.” To make a statue of him would demean his glory, reduce him to a false essence, “even if it looked strong, like a lion’s body with lasers sitting on a nuke.” That does not enhance his glory; it diminishes it. (“I’m getting signals from someone I love dearly... I really will stop.”) He transcends every image.

3. Not the way the nations worship

► 1:20:21

Other cultures made images to capture their gods’ essence, and God did not want to be worshiped the way they worshiped theirs. Israel was to tear down the nations’ altars, pillars and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree:

► 1:21:27

“You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way... take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? – that I also may do the same.’”

DEUTERONOMY 12:4, 30 ↗

► 1:22:08

That might sound offensive – they were worshiping the right God with their hearts in the right place. But God introduces himself, says what he is like, “you shouldn’t just guess,” and he has the right to say how he is to be worshiped and how not. It has to do with how he wants to be revealed. Imagine the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon to learn about his God and finding him on the front porch burning one of his children, or cutting his own hand and offering the blood, or beside a giant goat statue. “I guess he likes that kind of thing. I can tell my people back home.” God wanted all the nations to know

what he is like, and that is altruistic, “because he’s the only source of life. He wants to disciple and father nations.”

► 1:24:36

Israel kept trying to worship God however it wanted. The man at the end of Judges had a shrine with little statues and thought it was fine because he had a Levite for a priest – “a piecemeal, custom-made religion” (Judges 17). In 1 Samuel 4 the Israelites decided God was “in our box,” carried the ark into battle without asking, and were stunned when they lost it and Eli’s two sons died.

4. Where is idolatry now?

► 1:25:48

Page after page of the Old Testament shows people drawn into idolatry, so it must still tempt us. “And then it’s the year 2020, and it’s like, nope, I don’t have a frog statue, so I’m good.” That misses the point, Matt said: God does not want to be worshiped however we like, or to have his glory diminished by being captured reductively.

► 1:27:05

Some Christian books equate idolatry with loving something a lot: “I love my husband, but I don’t want him to be an idol.” But it is okay to love things. Jesus assumed you would pull your animal out of a pit even on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11). Nathan’s parable to David turns on how much the poor man loved his one little lamb – a picture of Uriah’s love for his wife, and part of why the story hurt (2 Samuel 12:1–6). Paul wished he could give himself for his fellow Jews (Romans 9:3). Loving your spouse or your countrymen is not idolatry.

► 1:28:50

So, three categories. “Point number one: if you are worshiping a statue, please stop.” Possible, “just not very likely.” Point two: there may be something you love in an unhealthy way that is cutting into your relationship with God. But the third is the most tempting and dangerous for the whole body of Christ, and why John ends his letter, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21): worshiping the right God, but the way we want, based on what we have crafted to suit our needs. “It’s Jesus, but he’s not really in charge of what he’s like. I’m in charge of what he’s like.”

► 1:30:38

A statue in your bedroom would be easy to point out. An unhealthy love might be visible to someone who knows you well. But this one is hard to find, even in yourself – “and that’s exactly what the danger is” – worshiping God as I want him to be, as I wish he were, or as I assume he is. (Someone had texted about icons: because Jesus truly took on flesh, the church in the 700s concluded you may picture him. “That’s not idolatry.”)

5. Take Jesus seriously, holistically

► 1:32:45

The safeguard is to take Jesus as holistically as you can: read all the stories about him and everything he said, take the whole Bible seriously, and do not build on one verse or one favorite book. Matt named some made-up gods. The passive-aggressive God who gives you a lot to do but will not lift a finger, always disappointed – “what is it this time?” – “not a pathetic, passive-aggressive CEO of a pyramid scheme.” Jesus as “Mr. Clean,” who takes care of your sin after you say an incantation and then has nothing else to do with you. And the God of a book Matt read in high school: a sweet, fumbling, naive old man who only ever affirmed, with “no holy fear about him.”

► 1:35:36

Because we cannot wrap our minds around him, we want to reduce him to something easy – “the embodiment of Precious Moments dolls,” or a scary dad. But the God of heaven “does what pleases him; he spoke from fire. He’s good, but he’s not a pushover. He is a Father, but also a King. He is love, but he doesn’t affirm everything. He is kind, but he also confronts. He’ll both cut and heal.” “You run out of adjectives.” There should be weight and gravity in how we see him: comfortable before him, and not; Father, and Lord.

6. Build on what is real

► 1:37:10

Why say this now? When people feel they are losing it or full of anxiety, “the first thing you want to grab onto is what’s real, because I feel disoriented. And what’s real is the God of heaven.” Build on a firm foundation. Sand may feel sweet and comforting at the time, but it will ruin you (Matthew 7:24–27). If you are already anxious, you need a strong tower, “a strong God who will be strong, full of grace and life,” to comfort you through every storm. As Lee had said earlier, stay faithful, “because he is your comfort, not circumstance.”

► 1:38:20

Two exercises. Pick a part of the Bible you have not read in a long time and ask, “God, what could you teach me here about you?” Remember you are the student, not wielding Scripture as an instrument for your own wishes. “Who knows what God is like? God does” – which is why he wants to explain himself, and why it is so wonderful that he became flesh so we could see and hear and touch him. And ask him directly: “How have I made an idol out of you by diminishing your glory?” “The great thing about him is, though he doesn’t have a statue with a mouth on it, he can actually speak.”

► 1:39:42

Matt prayed that God would pull out of their hearts the images they had carved of him in their minds, rest their souls, and place them back in the role of servant and friend – “we are not master, you are” – and reveal himself as he is, speaking comfort to everyone in the room and on the stream. “Merry Christmas.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Psalm 115:2–8
- Exodus 20:3–5
- Deuteronomy 4:15–16
- Deuteronomy 12:4,30
- Judges 17:5–13
- 1 Samuel 4:3–11
- Matthew 12:11
- 2 Samuel 12:1–6
- Romans 9:3
- 1 John 5:21
- Matthew 7:24–27

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said truth is better comfort than sugar-coating. Where have you been looking for comfort that feels good but is not rooted in what is real?
2. Psalm 115 says those who trust idols become like them. What does it look like to become spiritually blind or deaf by trusting the wrong thing?
3. Why do you think God cared so much about how Israel worshiped him, not only whom they worshiped?
4. Which of the made-up gods Matt described – the passive-aggressive boss, the “Mr. Clean” for sin, the sweet naive grandfather – are you most prone to, and what part of Scripture corrects it?
5. This week, what part of the Bible will you read as a student, asking God what he wants to teach you about himself?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R6Y9BupR-U&t=3905s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.