

The Dangers Posed by Idols

Introduction

One item that Scripture makes abundantly clear is the following admonition: ***Believers must avoid idols***. Both the Old and New Testaments contain numerous commands to not make or worship idols – and they also describe the consequences of *breaking* those commands. For example, consider the following passages:

Exodus 20:4-6 (ESV):

⁴ “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. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or 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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Leviticus 26:1 (ESV):

¹ “You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 4:25-26 (ESV):

²⁵ “When you father children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed.

Acts 15:28-29 (ESV):

²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

1 John 5:21 (ESV):

²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (ESV):

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

There are many, many additional passages, which are very similar to the ones above – i.e., they all prohibit believers from having *anything to do* with idols.

As a result, it appears to me that – at a *minimum* – any objects which represent pagan gods should not be present in a believer’s home. For example, if a Christian brings a statue of the pagan goddess Aphrodite into his home, then that certainly seems to **violate** the above commands – even if the Christian does not *literally* bow down to the statue.

Another item to consider

From the information above, it looks pretty clear that God wants His followers to avoid idols. However, that raises a question – **why**, *exactly*, does God want us to avoid them? Is it solely because God is “jealous” for our worship – as Exodus 20:5 states? Or could it be that there is an *additional* reason why God warns us to avoid idols?

As it turns out, some Christian groups have a very definitive answer to that question. Basically, from what I have seen, some Christian groups have the following basic belief:

If an idol is present in a person’s home, then it will be relatively easy for demons to attack the people who live in that home.

In other words, the basic belief is this: if an idol is present in a home, then it will be **easier** for demons to attack the people who live in that home, than it would have been if the idol had **not** been present.

To put it another way, the mere presence of an idol in a home facilitates demonic influence in that home – regardless of whether anyone actually *worships* the idol.

The Christian groups that share the above belief usually provide many testimonials from believers, which appear to support that belief. Here is a general example, of the *types* of information that these testimonials usually contain:

- For several years, an **unbelieving** husband and wife tried to have a baby, but they were unsuccessful. In fact, the wife was never even able to conceive.
- Then, at one point in time, the husband and wife both became devout Christians.
- After becoming Christians, the couple realized that they had an idol in their home – an idol of a pagan goddess. As soon as they made that realization, they *threw out* the idol – in fact, they physically **removed** the idol from their home.
- Finally, very shortly after removing the idol from their home, the wife became *pregnant* – and she subsequently gave birth to a healthy baby.

The above scenario certainly seems to suggest that the *presence of the idol* was preventing the wife from becoming pregnant. From that, some people extrapolate that the presence of the idol was allowing **demons** to torment the couple – and in this case, the demons were *preventing* the couple from having a baby.

So, let’s explore the above belief. In other words, let’s try to determine if Scripture provides any support, for the belief that the presence of idols makes it easier for demons to attack people.

The Scriptural description of idols

First, let's take a look at the Scriptural description of idols, to determine if idols – by themselves – have any “power”. Consider these passages:

1 Samuel 12:21 (NIV):

²¹ Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.

Psalms 135:15 (ESV):

¹⁵ The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.

¹⁶ They have mouths, but do not speak;
they have eyes, but do not see;

¹⁷ they have ears, but do not hear,
nor is there any breath in their mouths.

¹⁸ Those who make them become like them,
so do all who trust in them.

Isaiah 44:9-11 (ESV):

⁹ All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. ¹⁰ Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹ Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together.

Isaiah 45:20 (NIV):

²⁰ “Gather together and come;
assemble, you fugitives from the nations.
Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood,
who pray to gods that cannot save.

1 Corinthians 8:4 (ESV):

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”

All of the above passages state that idols, themselves, do not have any “power” at all. Basically, those passages describe idols as being “useless”, “profitable for nothing”, and “having no real existence”.

As a result, it certainly appears that idols, by themselves, do not have any ability to affect people. In other words, it appears that the mere *presence* of an idol in a home – all by itself – will not cause demons to become “attracted” to that home.

The reason why this is important is because some Christian groups believe that the presence of an idol in a home can cause problems for the householders, even if they do not even know that the idol is in their home!

For example, consider the following scenario: I move in to a new home; and – completely **unknown** to me – a statue of a pagan god is hidden away in a dark corner of the basement. Some Christian groups believe that the presence of that idol will automatically “attract” demons to my home – despite the fact that I am not even aware that the idol is there. However, the Scriptural passages above state that idols, by themselves, are “useless” and “nothing” – and as a result, in this scenario, it appears that the idol would not have any effect on me. (Of course, if I ever *found* the idol in the basement, then I would definitely need to get rid of it.)

Idols as a “snare” to people

The section above indicates that idols, by themselves, cannot affect us. So, does that mean that there is *no danger whatsoever* involved in associating with idols? Consider the passages below. Psalm 106 contains a brief “history” about many of the times that the Israelites fell away from worshiping God. Here are some excerpts from Psalm 106:

Psalm 106:19-22 (ESV):

¹⁹ They made a calf in Horeb
and worshiped a metal image.
²⁰ They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass.
²¹ They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
²² wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

Psalm 106:28-29 (ESV):

²⁸ Then they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor,
and ate sacrifices offered to the dead;
²⁹ they provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds,
and a plague broke out among them.

Psalm 106:34-39 (ESV):

³⁴ They did not destroy the peoples,
as the Lord commanded them,
³⁵ but they mixed with the nations
and learned to do as they did.
³⁶ They served their idols,
which became a snare to them.
³⁷ They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
³⁸ they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was polluted with blood.
³⁹ Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and played the whore in their deeds.

Verses 19 through 22 refer to Exodus 32, when the Israelites created – and worshiped – a golden calf, while Moses was receiving the commandments from God on Mt. Horeb (i.e., Mt. Sinai).

Verses 28 and 29 refer to Numbers 25, when the Israelites were drawn away by nearby Moabite women, to worship the idols of the pagan god Baal of Peor.

Finally, verses 34 through 39 refer to the Israelites' conquest of Canaan; primarily as described in the book of Joshua. God told the Israelites that they must completely *destroy* the tribes that were living in Canaan, but the Israelites did not do so. As a result, the Israelites gradually began to worship the idols of those tribes – and that idol worship eventually led them to even sacrifice their own *children* to idols.

All of the above accounts contain the following basic steps:

1. People explicitly *decided* to keep idols in their midst.
2. Eventually, being in such close proximity to idols tempted the people to *worship* those idols.
3. That idol worship then led the people to commit horrific sins – including sacrificing their own *children* to idols.

Basically, in each of the above cases, idols acted as a “snare” to people (as Psalm 106:36 states). In other words, the idols, *themselves*, did **not** have any “power” – but the fact that the idols were in such close *proximity* to people acted as a “temptation” to those people. This is similar in principle to an alcoholic keeping a bottle of wine in his house; or a compulsive gambler living across the street from a casino – the wine and the casino do not have any “power” in and of themselves; but they can act as a *temptation* to people.

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, Scripture contains numerous passages, which *explicitly* tell believers that they must avoid idols. As a result, it appears to me that Christians should **never** bring statues of pagan gods into their homes – simply because God told us to avoid idols.

Of course, that raises the question: **why** did God tell us to avoid idols? As it turns out, there are many passages in Scripture which provide an answer to that question. Basically, being in close proximity to idols can act as a “temptation” to people. In other words, if people explicitly decide to associate themselves with idols, then that can eventually lead them to worship those idols. That worship, in turn, can lead people to commit heinous sins.

In essence, Scripture tells us that idols, themselves, do *not* have any power – but if people knowingly and willingly *associate* with idols, then that association can be a “snare” to them.

There are some Christian groups who have an *alternate* belief about idols. Basically, some groups state that idols, themselves, have the power to “attract” demons. As a result, those groups state that if an idol is present in a person's home, then it will be very easy for demons to attack that person – even if the person does not even know that the idol is present in his home!

It appears to me that this alternate belief is not supported by Scripture. Basically, Scripture goes out of its way to tell us that idols are “useless”, “profitable for nothing” and even “having no real existence”. As a result, Scripture certainly seems to contradict the view that an idol – all by itself - can allow demons to attack people living nearby; even if the people in question are not *aware* of the idol’s existence. (If idols *did* have such power, then I would expect to see some examples of that power in Scripture – but I have not found any such examples.)

In any case, the “bottom line” to this issue is the same as mentioned in the introduction: ***Believers must avoid idols!***