

Let God Be God

On Sunday we took our fourth deep dive into I Thessalonians chapter 1. This time we focused on a phrase in verse 9 that says, “You turned to God from idols.”

1. Warm-up Question: Imagine you lived in the ancient world and, in the place where you lived, you had the choice among four gods/goddesses – the god of thunder, the god of war, the god of love and fertility, or the god of wisdom and knowledge. If you had to choose one of these gods, and only one, which would you choose and why?
2. By now we are pretty familiar with our Scripture passage, but repetition aids learning. So have someone read it aloud once again – I Thessalonians 1:1-9.
3. On Sunday we focused on a phrase in verse 9. “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” If you’ve been around church for a while, you’ve probably been told that idolatry is when you put someone or something ahead of God. Examples might include your spouse, or family, or job, or pleasure, or sports, or money, or popularity, or success, etc. In your own experience, what’s something you’ve been tempted, at one point or another, to elevate above God in your life?
4. In our Scripture, Paul does not use the term “idol” in the way suggested in Question 3 above. Instead, Paul was writing to a group of people who, before they came to faith in Jesus, literally worshiped idols, i.e., false gods. Most of us think we could never succumb to that temptation since we follow Jesus. But Jeff said, “Idolatry is not just about what name we call God, it’s also about how we understand and relate to God. It’s possible for us, even as Christians, to re-create God in our own image, reducing God to the equivalent of an ancient idol.” To keep that from happening, it’s helpful to understand ancient idolatrous practices, so we don’t inadvertently fall back into that primitive way of thinking.
 - a. In ancient times, people imagined that the heavenly realm was a mirror image of the earthly realm. Just like there are lots of people in the earthly realm, ancient people imagined many gods in the heavenly realm. Just like people down here have unique roles and responsibilities, they imagined the gods had many different roles. And just like people have weaknesses and petty rivalries, so too the gods. Basically, ancient people imagined the gods were a lot like us. Of course, since we are created in God’s image, there are similarities between us and God, but also a lot of dissimilarities. What are some ways that you think God is like us? What are some ways that you think God is very different from us?
 - b. Most ancient religions had nothing to do with morality. If the gods are like us, people figured the gods don’t care how we live. Instead religion was transactional. You’d pick the god or gods that had what you most needed, then try getting on their good side – through worship, sacrifice, flattery, allegiance, and building temples – hoping that if you give them what they want, they’ll give you more of what you want and less of what you don’t. Lots of people today are still motivated by this kind of “transactional approach” to religion. We too can fall

prey to it. What do you most want from God right now? If God doesn't give it to you, how will you feel about God?

5. There is a pivotal story in the Old Testament – when Moses encountered God at the burning bush – that dramatically illustrates the difference between idolatrous religion and true faith. As you read this story, bear in mind that many ancient people believed that if you could learn the proper personal name of a god, you could gain a measure of leverage over that god by publically invoking the name of that god when you asked for something. If the god answered, his reputation would grow. If the god failed to answer, he would be shamed. With this in mind, read Exodus 3:1-15. Notice how God responds in verse 14 to Moses' request for a name. What do you think we're supposed to learn about God from God's response to Moses?
6. Patrick Morley says, "The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is." What do you think he means?
7. Jeff offered three test questions that can help us assess whether we're worshipping the true and living God (the great I AM) or a lesser false god of our own making.
Question 1: Have I surrendered control to God or am I seeking control?
 - a. Think about something that hasn't gone "the way it was supposed to" in your life recently. Tell us what happened. When things didn't go your way, did you get angry and frustrated with God or willingly embrace what happened?
 - b. It's fine to ask God for things, but ultimately we're not the ones who get to decide. In the Garden, Jesus prayed, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Matthew 26:39. What should we learn from this prayer?
8. **Question 2: Do I insist on understanding everything or have I accepted my inability to ever fully understand?**
 - a. What is one of your greatest theological questions? Suppose you never figure out a "logical" answer to your question. Will you be ok with that?
 - b. Rob Bell says, "The moment God is figured out with nice, neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God." What do you think he means? Do you agree or disagree?
9. **Question 3: Do I act like God's supposed to serve me or like I'm here to serve God?** Even Jesus himself said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Matthew 21:28. Jeff shared the story of a famous army battalion who embraced dangerous missions with the motto was "Bahala na!" – which means, "Come what may!" What selfless, "dangerous" act of service is God calling you to embrace in your life right now, come what may? Have you embraced it?
10. Which of the three questions above is most challenging to you and why?