



In Greek mythology, there are creatures called sirens. Sirens were half-bird and half-women, and they were known for their beautiful singing. If you heard their singing, you would be utterly captivated by them, and you would be lured directly to them, only to then have the sirens destroy you. In one story, there was a man named Odysseus, who wanted to hear *what* the sirens were singing; so, he commanded his crew to tie him to the mast of the ship. He told the crew that no matter how much he begged to be released, they should not release him. In order to protect his crew from hearing the siren's song, he also commanded them to fill their ears with beeswax. As the ship sailed closer to the siren's, Odysseus was drawn in. He ordered the sailors to untie him, but they bound him tighter. Finally, they passed the sirens and became out of earshot from their song, and Odysseus was released. What was their song? Well, it was essentially them stating that they know everything past and future. It seems to be a song saying they'll give you the answers you're looking for. But, we know that their end is death, and Odysseus was miserable in his allurements from the sirens.

There's another story with the sirens, though. It's a story of one named Jason, who was the leader of the argonauts. He searched for the so-called Golden Fleece. On his journey, he needed to pass the sirens, so he was counseled to bring along with him the master musician, Orpheus. On the journey, as soon as Orpheus heard the siren's voices, he began to play his lyre even more beautifully than the siren's song, and Jason was spared.

Why do I tell you these two stories? Think of the siren's as temptation's call to us. When temptation cries out, it almost always reveals itself as something beautiful, something worthwhile: "You want this," "You're missing out," "I can give you what you don't have," "This is life." And sadly, I think many Christians respond to temptation like Odysseus. Because we don't want to sin, we begin to bind ourselves. We tell ourselves a whole lot of "no's" to keep ourselves from sinning. All the while, temptation keeps calling. We keep trying to resist. We go to our rules and regulations, and we tell others to bind us more tightly (and we call that accountability). All the while, we don't really address our heart. On the inside, we really want the sin. Internally, we really think sin is better than the journey we're on.

But what if the Christian life, and our fight against sin, was more like Jason's journey? He was one who didn't need to listen to the siren's voice. He didn't care. He was on a mission for something greater, and so, he called for a more beautiful and louder song to be played. Isn't that the case for us as Christians? We're on a journey in this life. The Bible tells us that if you are a follower of Jesus, you're on the path of life. You're headed to Heaven's shores! In this world we will have trials and temptations, but the song of the gospel is more beautiful than the song of the world. God the Son himself has come to play that song for us so that our hearts might not be lured by sin, but instead that our hearts would be drawn all the more to God himself.

So, I have a question for you. When you're tempted, who are you more like, Odysseus or Jason? Now, I know this is Greek mythology. This isn't the Bible. But I use this illustration because I think it's helpful as

we come to an end of 1 John. Today is our last day in this series. I always feel a sense of sorrow when I end a series through a book because I almost feel like I'm saying farewell to a friend. This letter has become all the more precious to me as I've been able to study and preach through it. And now we come to the last verse. The final words, and what are they? Let's look: Little children, keep yourselves from idols.¹

Keep yourselves from idols. Think about the siren's song. Keep yourself from shipwreck. Keep yourself from believing the voices of this world. But my question is, "How do we keep ourselves from idols?" We cannot take this one verse out of the context of the rest of 1 John. If you were here last week, you know that John was culminating to a very specific point. Our whole life and salvation, our obedience and reconciliation with God, is found in the real Jesus. If we have Jesus, we have everything. Without him, we have nothing of eternal value or meaning. So, John wrote in verse 20 that we know Jesus has come and given us understanding *so that* we may relationally *know* God. This could have been the ending of the letter. But it's not. And it makes sense why it's not. When we think about the audience John's writing to, they were hurt by their former friends who became false teachers who tried to change who Jesus is. Then they also taught that obedience to him really didn't matter all that much. So, in ending the letter, John stabilizes and assures this struggling group of Christians in the reality of who Jesus is, and then concludes by essentially stating that since they know Jesus, they should then keep themselves from idols. It's the idea, as we'll see more, of how Jason related to the siren's. There's a superior song than that of the world's temptations. That superior song will quench the lies and keep us protected from temptation.

With this in mind, the main idea of the sermon is: **Guard yourselves from idolatry.** This is almost verbatim what John states in verse 21, and all we're going to do today is break down this statement, and then bring some application for us. But before we do this, I don't want us to miss the two words that begin this verse, "Little children." It's been a while since John last used that phrase. But, as with John's writings, we discover that this was the first special phrase he uses for them towards the beginning of this letter in 2:1. Now he's using it at the end. To state what I've said in the past, this is not a derogatory phrase. This is a tender phrase. As Jesus said that the kingdom is filled with little children, so John takes this idea and is emphasizing they are in the caring arms of God, and John also cares for them as a loving parent would for their children. Don't miss the love of John here. In everything he's stated, he's only shown tender, compassionate love, and so he ends this letter to them (and by extension, to us). Guard yourselves from idolatry. What does this mean and what does this look like? Well, let's start with

Guard yourselves from idolatry. This is clearly a command from God through John. Now, up to this point, I've been giving the mythological illustration from an individualistic standpoint, but notice that John is writing to all the believers. And so for us, we cannot read this command simply as individuals – meaning, "You, alone and by yourself, guard yourself, and also you, alone by yourself, guard yourself." No, this is a communal command. We together seek to help guard each other from sin. I'm reminded of Galatians 6:1-2, which says, "**Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.**"² We have mutual love and responsibility towards one another. So, please do not walk away from this sermon thinking only of self.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:21.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 6:1–2.

Instead, think of John's example. He's concerned for all the little children together – just as Jesus is concerned for the little children. And so because our Savior is concerned for all of us, we get to imitate our Savior's concern for one another.

With that in mind, what does "guard" mean? And, why is John commanding us to guard ourselves? It can almost sound like we're in this world all alone, left to fend for ourselves. So, we can quickly take a command like this and try to pull up our bootstraps and try to fight with all our might. But that's being like Odysseus, with no stronger song, who just tries real hard to resist in his own strength and smarts. Is that the case for us as Christians? Are we left to fend for ourselves? No. Do you remember John's words just three verses earlier, telling us that Jesus himself protect us? We are not in this alone. As a matter of fact, the reason we can guard ourselves is because Jesus himself is actually protecting us! It's as if John is saying, "Because Jesus protects you, protect yourselves!" The context is clear. In the previous verses, we've been reminded again of the assurances we have because of Jesus. We've been empowered to obey. Jesus protects us. We've been transformed. We've been reconciled with God. Why? Because we have Jesus. Therefore, let's live in dependence on Jesus. Let's live in his song of restoration and salvation and live! So, we see that the command to guard must be understood not as us living alone by ourselves in our strength. It's a command based in Jesus' protection of us! Therefore, we're guaranteed to succeed because Jesus never loses his own!

Now, we can answer what it means to "guard." In my translation, it actually says "keep," but I've chosen the word guard because it's a unique Greek word that is actually used in contexts of guarding a prisoner or guarding a flock (cf. Acts 12:4; Lk. 2:8). While the word "keep" works here, I think "guard" might show more resolve. There's purposefulness. Christian, you know your flesh is prone to wander. You know your flesh can hear temptation's song and feel the pull, right? I remember when I was younger and I would think to myself, "Well, I'd never do that thing." Now, as I'm older, God has revealed more of my heart, and I realize that I would do *anything* if God's grace was pulled from me. Truly, like Paul, I can say, "I'm the worst sinner I know." I say this because there should be active steps in our lives to *guard* our hearts and keep them from running into territory it doesn't belong. Like a shepherd guards the sheep, protects the sheep, keeps the sheep; thus keeping the sheep safe and away from danger and also keeping the sheep where they need to be for nourishment; so we have a responsibility with one another to help each other – not only to protect from temptation, but also to help each other receive the nourishment we need so that we're not drinking and eating the food of temptation and sin.

All this said, you can say, "Well, now that I know what guard means, I'm going to be serious. I'm going to try really hard to guard me and to work at guarding you all!" What's interesting and sad is that I've seen three different ways that people have tended to "guard themselves" from the world and temptation that might seem godly, but actually run contrary to the Lord's ways. Remember, our guarding of one another must be because Jesus guards us! So, anything that doesn't follow Jesus isn't guarding, right? Exactly!

The three ways I've seen people "guard" is through being seclusive, fighting, or ignoring. I'm sure there are others, but these seem quite common. Think of **seclusion** (and I'll add isolation). You might experience temptations, and you think the answer is to hide. Hide yourself away from the temptations. I've heard stories of people who moved to different areas to get away from the temptations. I've also heard of people who try to only spend time with the people who agree with them on essentially all things because then they feel safe in that little bubble where everyone agrees. And, in isolation, they feel they're protecting themselves from the "big bad world out there." But you know what? The temptation follows. Do you know why? Because the temptation wasn't all out there, it was inside of

you, too! You can't run from you! Seclusion and isolation doesn't work. It might have an appearance of godliness, but it denies the power of God because Jesus doesn't say "Be out of the world and not of the world." He says, "Be in the world and not of it!" So, seclusion and isolation aren't the answer.

What about **fighting**? This seems to be an increasingly common method of the world in our day. And, this is a common method in many churches. If you have the enemies or bad people groups over there, you don't ignore them, you yell at them. You put them down, you mock them. You do this until maybe they feel stupid and will shut up. But the reality is that all it does it boosts your ego. You feel confident in yourself, but does Jesus call us to self-confidence? Are you guarding by yelling? Jesus actually says "Blessed are the meek" *in this world*. Meekness is power under control. In Ephesians, we're told that variations of sinful anger is what quenches the Spirit. We're also told we wrestle *not* against flesh and blood. So, sure, you may feel protected by being loud, and wrestling with human beings, but you're trusting in fleshly schemes. That's not guarding yourself, and if we as a church use these means, we're not guarding one another. Instead, we're being duped by the devil.

Finally, what about **ignoring**? Sometimes people try to ignore the temptations within and the trials outside of us. We just want to be positive and have a smile on our faces all the time. We think guarding ourselves means "the power of positive thinking." But Jesus says that in this world there will be tribulations, and Peter tells us to cast our anxieties at the Lord's feet. If we ignore, we're not trusting the Lord because we're not casting. God doesn't call us keep sins and temptations in the dark, ignoring them. No. He calls us to come to the light!

With these negative examples then we can say, "What does guarding look like?" It means being in the light with one another. It means not fighting others around us, but instead addressing one another's hearts. It means being in this world, but not of it. It means what John has been saying through this letter about loving one another, serving one another, sacrificing for one another – all because of the love, service, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ himself! We can love one another with the holy love of God because he has given that to us. We don't have to live in fear temptation's song, put beeswax in our ears or tie ourselves up to a mast, angrily wanting sin and believing it's better. No, the gospel song is louder and more beautiful. Have you heard that song? Has it drawn you in? Even as we have gone through this series in 1 John, have you heard it? From the very beginning, John telling us that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins! Meaning, Jesus satisfied the just punishment of God that sinners deserve! Are you a sinner? I'm a sinner! We all are. What is God's just punishment? Oh that we truly realized that God created us with special privilege and responsibility. Humans are utterly unique in creation. We are created in God's image, and we have rebelled against the one in whose image we've been created. We've loved the creature above the Creator and spurned him by savoring this world more than him. As a result, we've broken up relationships, people, and creation as well! The punishment we deserve is against the eternal God and deserving of eternal consequences. Can we imagine what it would be like to face that judgment? I've been nervous talking to a principle. I've been nervous just seeing a cop car driving behind me – even when I've done nothing wrong. But what would it be like to face God in the judgment in the future day where every declaration he makes is utterly perfect. What will he say to you? Will he say that you must suffer the consequences of what you've done or will he say that Jesus suffered them in your place? John says that anyone who agrees with God about their sins and turns to Jesus will be forgiven, fully cleansed. John says that Jesus satisfied the judgment! John says now that Jesus also prays for us and stands at our defense even when we sin as Christians. John says that because of Jesus, God now empowers us to obey and follow him! What glorious good news, amen? So, like Orpheus with Jason, may we as a church family, pick up the gospel message and speak it to each other again and again.

Now, we can move on to the next part of the command.

Guard yourselves from idols.

While this passage was relatively easy to study because of it being one, small, straightforward verse, I discovered that there's debate over what John means by idols. Shocker, right? There almost always seems to be debates over almost everything. As I read through these points, I'll be transparent here: I don't know which one is the right one. But each point is spoken of in the Scriptures, and I'm confident that God wants us to keep ourselves from all of them. So, let me briefly talk of each one:

Literal: In the 1st century, there were real carvings that people worshipped. I remember when I visited Germany. The town I stayed in had been an ancient border town for the Roman Empire back in the 2nd century. When I was in the museum in that town, with artifacts from that location, I saw an altar. In the Roman Encampment there was an altar where the soldiers were to sacrifice to the Emperor. What do you think happened to those who wouldn't sacrifice? More than likely, they would be sacrificed. We know in the first, second and third centuries that many Christians were persecuted for their faith in Jesus, and so maybe John's words in 3:16 mean all the more when he says we are to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Even in dying for Christ's sake and refusing to worship idols, the early church was strengthened. More people even became believers in Christ because they saw that these people lived for something eternal. Think about what this means for us, Ventura. While we don't have literal idols as much in our culture, I think we can relate to the governmental idolatry. I fear that both major political parties are vying for people's absolute affection and commitment, and while I'm *for* Christian influence in governments, we all must realize that no government is Jesus' Kingdom. Do you know that? No matter even how much Bible was used as principles in founding documents, it's still not the Kingdom to come. Now, I get the longing to find comfort in having a "safe government." It's built within us because we were made for a perfect kingdom. We're made for the Kingdom to come. That said, Jesus tells us that even his miracles of revivals in societies will only restrain things for a time from getting worse. I don't say this to say "Give up on government and politics," but I do say it so that we would ask our hearts where our passions lie? Also, what is our primary message? The message of Jesus' Kingdom is the gospel. Sadly, I think more Christians know the talking points of politics, and they announce it to all sorts of people in all sorts of contexts and they rarely evangelize. If that's you, I'd encourage you to think if you idolize government. Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, we don't depend on this society that is guaranteed to pass away. This would be a more literal interpretation of idol. The second way to interpret is

General: This is the broadest understanding. To speak of idolatry generally means that John is stating that we shouldn't value anything at the level of God or above. This fits with Romans 1 that says that humanity worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator. We lift ourselves up. We make ourselves superior. We act in ways to make God submit to us instead of us realizing our need to submit to him. So, if this is the general interpretation, which the Scripture speaks of elsewhere, what are idols "generally" in this life. Answer: anything. How do you view money? You know how you view it when the bank account is low. Or, maybe you know you idolize money because the bank account is filled. Either way, try to start giving it away. Be generous. If you hear that exhortation, how does your heart feel? Do you say, "no, that's mine!" Or, "that'd be foolish"? That might be an idol. You're valuing it too highly than you ought to. Maybe for you, you live life for affirmation from people. You need to hear you're a good parent or an amazing servant in church. Maybe you prize good grades in school so highly that it's become almost an identity thing for you. Maybe it's sensuality. Maybe it's relaxation.

How can you tell if something's an idol? How do you act when it's taken away? If your life falls apart, that's probably an idol. How do I know that? Because John just said that Jesus is our life. You can take away things in this life from a Christian, and while they may be horribly sad to lose, your life isn't taken away. But for someone who has an idol that's taken away, they wonder if they should end their lives or they try to find something else to experience life in because they don't have Jesus. So, John could be speaking literally. He could be speaking generally. Finally, we have the

Metaphorical: The Greek word for idol actually comes from the idea of being a "phantom" or a "ghost." The apostle Paul alludes to this when he speaks of idols to the Corinthians, saying that the idols aren't really anything, in 1 Corinthians 8. If this is what John is saying, it fits the context of this letter because the false teachers were teaching things that weren't real. They were making up stuff about Jesus and his commands that were false. They were "phantoms." This fits in another place in Scripture, in Colossians, where we read, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."³ We find truths like this elsewhere. We need discernment to know truth from error. And, boy do we need that in our day as well. With the plethora of social media platforms and outlets for people to share their opinions, there's such increase in false teaching, twisting what the Scriptures say, denying what Christ's Church has held for centuries. Are you falling for this? Are there modern ideas that are being purported today that you're playing around with, and twisting the Scriptures to agree with you on? Flee the phantom! It's a ghost. There's no reality behind it. Whether it has to do with the prosperity gospel or gender debates or believing your actions don't matter to God (like these first century people began to taught), expose the phantom as it is. Or, to go back to the initial illustration, drown out the deathly siren's song! Don't play around with modifying Scripture. And, if you think it's no big deal to twist the Bible, oh please remember this letter. Those who twisted Scriptures ended up leaving. They revealed who they were. As John said, "They went out because they weren't of us." Don't go down that path. And, if you're God's child, we've already been assured that can't happen to us. So, if you're a Christian and toying with these idolatries, turn now! Confess. He's faithful to forgive.

As I say all of this, I want to anchor us again in John's writing. We hear "guard yourselves from idols," and the emphasis of how we're going to guard is by focusing our eyes on God's glory in Jesus. I want to remind you of last week's sermon. As we got to the end of us, I spoke on the beauty of John's words where he says that Jesus came to give us knowledge mentally so that we would know God relationally. This is how we're going to guard ourselves from idols. Do you know *so that* you'll know God? Will you focus your energies on learning about Christ so that you will love Jesus more in your daily living and resist temptations and flee the idols of your heart? Or do you just resist sin like Odysseus? I pray that you know so that you'll so. And, it's with this in mind that we move to communion. Even this helps us to guard ourselves from idolatry. So, **by (and on the basis of) Jesus' keeping power, let's guard ourselves from idolatry.**

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:8.