

# American Idols

November 2022

Many pastors in America today are holding their breath. Congregations are worried. Has the pandemic inflicted permanent injury to the life of the local church? Will church members ever come back to worship in person again, engage in weekly church community activities as they once did? Or have churches lost people forever to the comforts of their homes, watching Sunday services on-line, inadvertently keeping church communities at a distance, and at what price to our souls? Will churches continue to shut their doors and sell their properties as many have begun to do? How many Americans have developed new habits on weekends that no longer include matters of faith or the observance of Sabbath rest? The Bible warns us of these kinds of temptations and shifting winds, developing idols and worshiping gods other than our Lord.

Financial analysts tell us the price for sports rights has more than tripled in the last ten years in America, and that football games on Sunday and during the week alone comprise two-thirds of these transactions. Talented football players are often promoted and compensated like modern-day gods; many television stations are now flooded with commentators who analyze every pass or run after a game is over for days on end. Television coverage for hockey and other games now include multiple opportunities to wage a bet and take chances on a family's hard-earned money. Watching NHL, NFL, MLB and NBA games has taken on a casino-like atmosphere. Sports betting is now one of the most booming industries in our country. And every sporting event today is infused with alcohol promotion to make sure everyone is having a great time, and more inclined to take risks with their savings. Being a reverent, humble, observant follower of God and attending church has taken back seat to the festivities associated with tailgating for thousands on any given weekend.

Life during the current pandemic is not the first time God's people have stepped away from each other and avoided worship and service. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert after having been emancipated from slavery in Egypt nearly 4,000 years ago, they revolted against their leader Moses for ignoring them and taking too much time on top of Mount Sinai talking with God. They did not know what to do with this unexpected and unstructured time on their hands, and as a result lost sight of their mission to be grateful followers of God, looking for their promised land. During this time, however, Aaron, supposedly a trusted leader with Moses, urged his people to worship a golden calf instead of God. He encouraged them to rebel against Moses' leadership. Soon the Israelites became chaotic and mean-spirited following Aaron's advice. They had completely lost sight of their one true God, their Lord and savior. They had allowed themselves to fall prey to the temptations and idols of this world. Eventually, God intervened and through Moses helped the Israelites return to their one true love in him.



Now, make no mistake, I am a big sports fan. I loved playing sports growing up and I still play or watch sporting events whenever I can. However, sports and powerful athletic figures are not my higher power. God is my Lord and savior, not the teams I love. Given the choice, I would much rather attend church, greet friends on a Sunday morning and cherish the opportunity to confess my sins, enhance my wisdom, and be renewed in God's word. A sports team cannot forgive my

sins or offer me needed wisdom or solace; or make me more peaceful and centered. It can give me wonderful entertainment and happiness, and provide phenomenal fun with friends and family, but it cannot give me the sanity and counsel I need on a regular basis, or the eternal rest my soul longs for every day. I need the discipline of the Sabbath in my life.

Nearly the same thing can be said about politics in America today. If we are not careful, we can make the election of certain candidates or parties as important as our relationship to God. In fact, many people believe that the current violent and belligerent behavior in our political arenas today is the result of people placing a greater trust, interest, and time in politics rather than religion or faith. If we do not primarily and ultimately place a greater trust in God with our lives and the wellbeing of our communities and families, we will often unknowingly place unnecessary and unfair pressure and

expectations on our elected officials and the elections, which have placed them in positions of authority. Some candidates and their successful election have become our savior instead of God himself. Fears and hatred of the candidate we oppose can become frighteningly exaggerated, delusional, and even destructive. In today's environment we are seeing this kind of hateful drama unfold with David DePape recently plotting his kidnaping and harming the Pelosi family in San Francisco; or the gunman who sprayed bullets towards Rep. Steve Scalice and five other government officials in Washington DC; or the vigilantes in Michigan who tried to kidnap a governor; or angry voters storming the US capitol because they did not like the results of the national election. These people are worshiping politics instead of obeying and honoring our God.



Of course, I believe deeply in the importance of politics, good governments, and elected officials. The Bible tells us we are to respect and honor these special leaders as agents and representatives of his will. However, we are not to elevate them to a status equal to God. Our Lord's kingdom is greater than the governments of this world. Our Lord can change the direction of history at any moment in time, according to his will. He is our highest and most important loyalty. We are to place our trust in him above all else. However, if we stop practicing our spiritual disciplines of worshiping and serving our Lord on a regular basis, we will lose our bearings in unhealthy ways; our minds and souls will become cloudy, unfocused, and potentially dangerous to ourselves and others. If we have a healthier relationship with our God, and our particular candidate or team does not win, our lives should not fall apart. God is still in control; there is no need to panic. Learning to handle setbacks is an important part of Christian life. My heart broke earlier this fall when a team failed to win an important soccer match in a large stadium in Indonesia and the losing team's fans stormed the field in anger that resulted in hundreds of deaths. Without faith in God, we can become scared and helpless in the face of setbacks and defeats. We become irrationally fearful. We lose perspective and forget that God is in control.

What receives your greatest loyalty and attention? If it is anything other than our Lord, it is only a matter of time before things will begin falling apart in your life. As much as I love my wife, Sharon, and our five children, or the many friends and family members we have, I do not love them more than my Lord. My entire life is held together and made peaceful by Christ. He enables me to love others in ways I could never do on my own. I need to worship and love God on a regular daily basis or else I will forget him and begin following the idols of this world. In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminds us, "I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe in him. This is the same mighty power

that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but also in the world to come." (Ephesians 1:19-21)

Don't forget your church community. It is waiting and hoping you will return as this pandemic has eased. The goal is not to be alone. God created us to be in community with each other, and that does not mean being in virtual community only, glued to our personal computer screens or television sets. It means finding a group of believers, big or small, with whom you can meet on a regular basis, pray, and worship your Lord together.

As we round the bend from fall into winter and gather soon for our Thanksgiving meals to give thanks to our Lord, now is a good time to seek a personal retreat and take inventory of anything that may be an idol in your life, causing worry, angst, fear, frustration or even anger. If we confess such idols, our Lord is abundantly merciful, rejoicing in our reconciliation with him.

Most of us like to think we follow the ten commandments. However, may we never forget one that is most important: "You must never have any other god than me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in heaven or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for other gods." (Exodus 20:3-5a)

As you gather with family and friends during this Thanksgiving season, please be grateful for the love and blessings God gives us every day and share that love in person in your church and in your community. From our home to yours, my family and I wish you a very special time together. May God bless you.

