The church that is in the world today has a big problem - the problem is that **there is too much of the world in the church!**

John said in 1 John 5:21 – “Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts.” NLT

Yet that is exactly what we have done, we have and are allowing other things to take God’s place in our hearts and lives! We have allowed **idolatry** into the church and our lives! **“How,”** you say! **“We aren’t idol worshippers!”**

Either you are right with God or you are wrong with Him. If you aren’t right with God, that means something else is more important to you than God – that makes you an **idolater!**

In the days of ancient Israel, there was great temptation to worship the gods of **“materialism”** (Baal, the god of weather and financial success) and **“sex”** (Ashtoreth, the goddess of sex, romance, and reproduction), or any number of other local deities. We are tempted to worship the same gods, but without the old-fashioned names and images.

You see, you can make a god out of anything. Anything that is more important to a person than obeying God is an **idol.** Some have made **pleasure** a god. Some have made **money** a god. Some have made a god out of **science and learning.** Some a god of **health.** Some a god of **sports.** Some a god of **nature.** Some a god of **popularity.** And some a god of **youth and beauty.**

To some it’s the **love of money** and the accumulation of **possessions** and **material things.** To others it’s some kind of **system** (whether it works or not). The system might be political, sociological, institutional, or economic.

To others their idol may be **fame** (a desire to be somebody), **people** (actors, musicians, athletes), **entertainment** such as television, movies, music, or a **cause**, a **job**, a **sport**, a **hobby**, or even an **addiction** such as lying, stealing, drugs, alcohol, gambling, or sexual immorality, or some other thing or sin.

For some their idol is their **leisure time.** Many people hate to give up their time – that’s why they aren’t here. Hebrews 10:25 – “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” NLT

**Selfishness** is an idol, when “self” is more important than God. Romans 2:8 – “…He will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness.” NLT

**Stubbornness/pride** is idolatry in the eyes of God. Proverbs 21:4 – “Haughty eyes, a proud heart, and evil actions are all sin.” NLT

**Covetousness/greed** is idolatry in the eyes of God. Ephesians 5:5 – “You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.” NLT

Without a doubt, we have modern idols, and they are wreaking havoc in the church. Far too many people have and are allowing the cares of the world and the pursuit of riches to control them. Far too many people have and are allowing the Word of God to be choked out (not listening). Too many people have lost their spirituality, their hearts are not right with God, their motives are not pure, and their lives are stained with sin.
Their “religion” has become nothing more than a ritual, just something they do, motions they go through. At the same time, although they are not experiencing any real joy or happiness, they think they are doing the right thing as far as God is concerned. This is not a new problem - the Bible is full of examples of people who did the same thing.

Church at Sardis: **Revelation 3:1** - “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” NKJV

Church at Laodicea: **Revelation 3:14-17**; “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked…” NKJV

In looking at the people of the Bible who are mentioned in these passages, you would never know they were once sincere children of God. In looking at some church members of today, you would never know that they were once sincere, dynamic servants of God!

**I. The Problem with Judah**

**Isaiah 1:10** - “Listen to the Lord, you leaders of “Sodom.” Listen to the law of our God, people of “Gomorrah.” NLT

In *Isaiah 1:10* the Lord calls them “Sodom.” But these were God’s people - what was wrong? It seemed like they were doing the right things – they offered the required sacrifices, they appeared before God (attended worship services), they burned their incense, observed the required religious feasts, and prayed.

But God knew what was on the inside, what was in their hearts, and He let them know He didn’t like what He saw:

**Isaiah 1:11-15**: “What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?” says the Lord. “I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting—they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.” NLT

In these verses, God was telling them that their religion was only skin deep (like beauty). On the outside they looked like faithful servants, but things are not always what they appear to be!

In *1 Samuel 16:7*, Samuel couldn’t believe that God wanted Him to anoint David as the king instead of one of David’s brothers: “But the Lord said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” NLT
II. The Problem in Jesus’ day

Jesus Himself tried to correct this problem when He dealt with the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. In fact, the hardest words Jesus ever spoke on this planet were to people who were trying to live to the absolute letter of the law, but were forgetting what was really important. The problem with the Jewish leaders was that their interpretation of the law was more important to them than the law itself; keeping their interpretations of the law became more important to them than God!

Matthew 23:1-7: “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’”” NLT

Matthew 23:23-28: “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel! “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.”” NLT

You do not have to study the lives of the Pharisees long to realize they were only going through the motions of being religious. But Jesus said it’s not what is on the outside that counts, it’s the internal things that matter of the most. The Pharisees were masters of creating a good-looking exterior, but inside they were as dead as a door knob.

Now if you went to church with the Pharisees (who says we don’t), you would find a group of people who attend every church service. They would be on time and they would all be carrying their Bibles. None of them would ever swear, drink or ever commit adultery - and all will go straight to hell! Jesus said in Matthew 5:20 - “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!” NLT

Jesus is saying your righteousness must be on the inside.” He is calling for a clean heart, not just a clean shirt! He always has!

Psalm 51:16-17: “You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering. The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.” NLT

Proverbs 4:23 – “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.” NLT

Jeremiah 17:9-10: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart; I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.” NKJV
**Ezekiel 18:31** – “Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?” NLT

**Joel 2:12-13**: “That is why the Lord says, “Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Don’t tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish.” NLT

**Mark 7:20-23**: “And then he added, “It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.” NLT

### III. The problem today

Many Christians and churches today are guilty of being like these Jews and Christians we have read about today - many are putting on a show of religion instead of really dealing with their sin and with God. They simply live their lives pretending to have their spiritual act together, i.e., on the outside they are beautiful but on the inside “full of dead men’s bones and all corruption.”

Friends, a person can put on a clean suit and pretend to be something. That doesn’t impress God. We can never behave our way into heaven. Becoming a new creation means we change on the inside! 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “…anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” NLT

The church should be in the business of living and proclaiming the active, supernatural, dynamic Word of God, but what does the world really see when it looks at the church? What do people, sometimes members, see when they come? Do they see the power of God working in people’s lives? Do they see men of faith like Daniel who stood against an empire? If not, why not?

Instead of seeing the all-powerful God of grace at work in our lives, the world often sees Christianity as just another religion that’s irrelevant to the dealings of everyday life. Is it any wonder that people are so confused about God and the church? When the world cannot see an active and dynamic church, it no longer looks for God.

Because of the example that is being set by those who call themselves Christians, many people today (to include many Christians) have never known what a joy worshiping God really is. Too many people look at “coming to church” as a task, a burden, a duty – but not something to be enjoyed.

They don’t see the power of God really at work in people’s lives because the church is denying the power of being truly Godly: 2 Timothy 3:5 – “They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly…” NLT

It may be possible that we are doing the right things today. We may attend church on the first day of the week, partake of the Lord’s Supper, sing songs, pray, read the Bible, give money, etc. But it won’t do us any good if we do everything technically perfect while at the same time we are rotten to the core on the inside, like the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus calls the church to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16). But how can Christians be light to a dying world when we, too, are full of sin and darkness and idolatry?
Friends, we don’t want to be known in the community as a bunch of hypocrites because people see us go to church on Sunday but sinning on Monday – Saturday; a group of so-called Christians who are always fighting among ourselves, and seem to be more concerned with what other people are doing wrong than what we are doing wrong or right. We don’t want to be known as a church that does things technically perfect, while at the same time God is comparing us to Sodom and Gomorrah, like He did Judah; as a church full of hypocrites, sons of hell and a brood of vipers like the Scribes and Pharisees; as a church with a reputation for being alive, while in reality we are dead, like Sardis; or as a lukewarm church like the Laodiceans, thinking we are rich because we have material things, while Jesus knows that spiritually we are really wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked!

What do we want the church known for? In a word – loved. We want to be known as a group of people who cares for each other and the other people in the community. We want to be known as a group of people who love God more than anything else, and will stand up for the truth no matter what, and who are lifting up Jesus every day:  

*John 12:32* – “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” NKJV

Jesus said that the world would know we are truly His disciples, not by the laws and/or traditions we keep and try to bind on each other and people outside the church, but by the love we have for each other in the church -  

*John 13:34-35*: “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” NLT

Friends, we will never change the world by going to church – we will only change the world by being the church!

Never forget - “It’s what’s inside that counts!”

*Luke 24:32* – “They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” NLT

What’s in your heart today?