

1 John 5:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

Analysis

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen. John concludes with urgent warning. "Little children" (teknia) is his affectionate address throughout the letter, emphasizing pastoral care. "Keep yourselves from idols" (phylaxate heauta apo tōn eidōlōn). Phylassō (φυλάσσω) means to guard, protect, or keep watch. The command is present imperative indicating continuous vigilance. Eidōlon (εἰδωλον) means idol—false gods, images, or anything usurping God's rightful place.

This abrupt ending may seem disconnected from the previous verse's lofty Christology, but the connection is clear: having affirmed Jesus Christ as the true God and eternal life, John warns against anything false. Idols are antithetical to the true God. This includes literal pagan idols (prevalent in first-century Asia Minor) and any substitute for God—wealth, pleasure, status, even religious systems that distort Christ's identity or require anything besides faith in Him alone for salvation.

The warning is corporate ("yourselves") and individual—each believer must actively guard against idolatry. This isn't passive avoidance but active vigilance. Given human proclivity toward idolatry (exchanging God's glory for created things, Romans 1:23), constant watchfulness is necessary. The letter that began affirming Christ's incarnation and life (1:1-4) ends warning against idols—maintain exclusive devotion to Jesus Christ, the true God, rejecting all counterfeits. "Amen" confirms the certainty and importance of all that preceded.

Historical Context

First-century believers faced literal idol worship everywhere—temples, public ceremonies, marketplace meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). Leaving paganism for Christianity meant dramatic break from surrounding culture's religious practices. This made idolatry a constant temptation and danger. Paul similarly warned Corinthian and Ephesian believers about idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14, Ephesians 5:5, where covetousness is called idolatry).

Beyond literal idols, any false teaching about Christ functions as idolatry—worshiping a false Christ. The Gnostic teaching John combated throughout the epistle was sophisticated idolatry, replacing the true Christ with counterfeit. Today's idols may be less obviously religious but equally dangerous—materialism, self-worship, political ideology, even ministry or family elevated above God. John's final command remains perpetually relevant: guard yourselves from idols, maintaining exclusive devotion to Jesus Christ, the true God and eternal life.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What subtle idols in your life (things, people, ambitions, or ideas) compete with Jesus Christ for supreme devotion?
2. How can you actively 'keep yourself' from idols rather than passively assuming you're immune to idolatry?
3. Why would John conclude a letter emphasizing love and assurance with this stark warning against idols, and what does this say about idolatry's danger?

Interlinear Text

Τεκνία,	φυλάξατε	ἑαυτοὺς	ἀπὸ	τῶν	εἰδώλων	ἀμήν
Little children	keep	yourselves	from	G3588	idols	Amen
G5040	G5442	G1438	G575		G1497	G281

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 10:14 (Parallel theme): Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.

1 Corinthians 10:7 (Parallel theme): Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

Matthew 6:13 (Parallel theme): And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 1:9 (Parallel theme): For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;