

Luther on Isaiah 44:9

9. All who make idols are nothing. All image-makers are useless and vain. Likewise the things that are dear to them, their finest and most desirable, can do nothing for them.

Their witnesses do not see. The same is stated in Ps. 115:5. The images are like those who make them. As their god is, such is their teaching and their religion. Their god is nothing, he is a manufactured object. What sort of worship could they have? This must be applied as a general truth to all kinds of idolatry, which might look different today and yet are the same in kind. Work righteousness is the fountain and source of all outward idols. The same abomination in the heart appears in a variety of idols and images. Therefore this text must be applied to all rites that originate with work righteousness, because this idol is opposed to faith in Christ. It is just as ridiculous, and even more so, to revere cowls and cords as it is to adore a pagan image. Idolaters are all teachers who teach something apart from God, teachers who are not shaped and formed by God but who shape and form Him, as the Franciscan imagines God: "On this way and in this manner of life I will serve my God by this ritual, this food." By this mode of a chosen life he strives and believes he is pleasing God and attaining to the forgiveness of sins, so that he even presumes to save and help others. And day by day that idolatry increases, and always he thinks, "God is the kind that needs my work." But this text says, "There is no such God as is produced by human thought." In our nature we look at God as through painted glass, and we see God in conformity with our thought. So the self-righteous look at God through a glass. Thus the Sacramentarians see God as a manufacturer of symbols, as one who operates with signs, because they look at God through a glass. However, one who looks at God by faith knows that God does not regard him because of his righteousness but for the sake of His own grace, as you heard sufficiently at the end of the last chapter. We are shaped by the Word to the righteousness of God. But the manufacturers and inventors of a teaching for life shape and form God. Thus the pope is an idol-maker who neglects the teaching about faith and sets up various sects and forms of self-righteousness.

Therefore it is well for you to know what makes one an image-maker: a shaper, an idolater, that is, every ungodly religion or thought which does not believe that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake and therefore is quick to take up with endless works and monstrosities in a search for righteousness. Moses acted differently. He did not set up rules for living until he had first given thorough instruction on the first three commandments. From an understanding of these, all the other, external commandments proceed. We can lead a godly life in any kind of life. Before dealing with governmental and economic affairs, in any kind of life, the commandments begin with faith in God, and then the other commandments strive toward Him. The self-righteous, however, begin to appease God with works and ceremonies and then undertake to obtain faith. This is making an idol. He who truly knows sins and the free forgiveness of God does not seek his own satisfactions, he does not shape God but is shaped by Him. Know therefore that all other teachers outside of faith are nothing. The papacy is nothing. Ecclesiastical colleges are nothing.

Luther, M. (1999, c1972). Vol. 17: Luther's works, vol. 17 : Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66 (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (17:107). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. Martin Luther's commentary on Isaiah 44:9
