

Lesson 4: Gospel and Heart (Identifying Idols)

Key concept Identifying idols

Objective:

*Help you identify the idols of your heart and understand how to apply the Gospel

IDENTIFYING IDOLS PROJECT

A. THE DEFINITION OF IDOLS (What they are).

Romans 1:25 tells us that idols are not sinful things, but good and basic things elevated into being ultimate things (v.25 - *worshipped-created things rather than the Creator*). We look to them for meaning in life, for covering our sense of insignificance, for developing a "righteousness" or worth.

"An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that... is central in my life, anything that seems to me...essential... An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend, anything that...holds such a controlling position in my life that...it moves and rouses and attracts so much of my time and attention, my energy and money," D.M.Lloyd-Jones, "Idolatry" in Life in God. Studies in 1 John.

"The virtues on which the mind preens itself as giving control over the body and its urges, and which aim at any other purpose or possession than God, are in point of fact vices rather than virtues," Augustine, City of God, Ch. 19:25.

"[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts... All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like... When a general is taken, the army runs. Even so this, the main idol, is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets which bring supply...this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort..." Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God.

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B. THE MOTIVATION FOR IDOLS (Why we have them).

Romans 1:21 tells us that the reason we make idols is because we want to control our own lives (v.21 -*thought they knew God, they neither glorified him or gave him thanks*).

“Sin predisposes us to want to be independent of God, to be laws unto ourselves or autonomous, so that we can do what we want without bowing to His authority. At the most basic level, idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world, if we do not want to face the face of God Himself in his majesty and holiness. Rather than look to the Creator and have to deal with his lordship, we orient our lives toward the creation, where we can be more free to control and shape our lives in our desired directions... since we were made to relate to God; but do not want to face Him (and let him control and shape us, thus we forever inflate things in the world to religious proportions to fill the vacuum left by God’s exclusion:... We do not just eliminate God, but we erect God-substitutes in his place.” Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory" in No God but God.

C. THE MOTIVATION FROM IDOLS (How they affect us.)

1. Distorted thinking.

Romans 1:21 tells us each idol creates a delusional field, a whole set of assumptions and false definitions of success and failure which are distortions of reality brought on by the idol (v.21 - *their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*).

“[Your] idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. [They spin out a whole false belief system.] They establish a locus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g. lust for money), other people (e.g. I need to please my father), or myself (e.g. attainment of my personal goals). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of values and stigma. Idols promise blessings and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail [their standards]. If I [make enough money], I will be secure. If I can get these certain people to like and respect me, then my life will be valid,” David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair.”

2. Emotional bondage.

Romans 1:25 tells us that each idol "darkens the heart" and enslaves us (v.25 - *worshipped and served created things*). Whatever we worship, we must serve. The way the idol enslaves is that it creates over-desires, inordinate longings.

"Idols of the heart are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1-8... If 'idolatry' is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then 'lust' [inordinate desires], is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift.

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(See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal 5:16ff; Eph.2: 3, 4:22; I Pet. 2:11, 4:2; I John 2.16; James 1:14ff, where "epithumiai" is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against coveting; which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]...also...makes sin psychodynamic. It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7...the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed idolatry" (Eph. 5.5 and Colossians 3:5), David Powlison "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair."

3. The sin under every sin.

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry, and then come commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.

"The greatest danger and enemy that confronts us is not a matter of deeds or of actions, but of idolatry...That may sound very strange to some. Some think that above all we need to be warned not to do certain things... But our deeds and actions are always the outcome of our attitudes and thoughts. So John takes the same procedure as the 10 commandments. All the Scriptures always start like this, they always say, start here - the greatest danger is idolatry. " D.M.Lloyd Jones "Idolatry" in Life in God: Studies in 1.

"The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry...[All murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God - yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry. " Tertullian, On Idolatry.

This means then that idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love, or keep promises, or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful," but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So, the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.

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Summary:

1. Unbelief

We know God, but we reject him as God, and seek to be our own God and Savior.

2. Unrighteousness

Result: Fear and a sense of spiritual "nakedness," a loss of "righteousness," a sense of shame and unworthiness.

3. Idolatry

Therefore: we serve created things as "gods" instead to maintain our independence from God, yet to still replace the lost worth, "righteousness."

4. Lie System

Deep within us is a false belief system centered on the idol(s) that something besides God can provide us with worth and satisfaction.

5. Slavery

Whatever we worship, we serve. Since we must have the things we serve to "cover" our unworthiness, they drive us to over-effort to get them and fill us with fear and anger if circumstances jeopardize them. If we fail to attain them, they punish us with terrible self-loathing. Therefore, everyone is in "covenant service" to a "lord" that works its will out through our bodies (Rom. 6:16-19).

Rom.1:21 - Though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.

Gen.3:7 - Then...they realized they were naked, so they...made coverings for themselves.

Rom.1:25 – They... worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator.

Rom. 1:21 - So their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened... (25) so they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

Rom.1:25 – Worshipped and served... created things... (26) therefore God gave them over to... lusts.

Even after conversion, our old false saviors/lords have continued power. Though we intellectually deny them, our hearts still functionally acknowledge them unless the Holy Spirit renews us (Romans 7:14-25). Our fear, anger, and habits still arise from false saviors that we still deeply feel we must have for our value. So the key is uprooting residual, leftover self-salvation systems. Sin only masters us if we let these old idols continue to force us to "earn our salvation" through them. (Rom.6:14 - *Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.*)

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ASSIGNMENT – “IDENTIFYING YOUR IDOLS”

Between this week and next week, we will take a first stab at identifying some of the particular idols of our heart. Do the following:

A. Using "Problem Emotions" to identify idols.

Read:

1. Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living. A value is anything good in the created order, any idea, relation, object or person in which one has an interest, from which one derives significance...
2. These values compete... In time, one is prone to choose a center of value by which other values are judged...[which] comes to exercise power or preeminence over other values.
3. When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen...a god...One has a god when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully. (To be worshipped as a god, something must be sufficiently good...were my daughter not a source of exceptional affection and delight, she would not be a potential idolatry for me, but I am tempted to adore her in a way...disproportional.)

Anxiety [Idolatry and the future]

1. Anxiety becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken: to the depths.

Guilt/Bitterness [idolatry and the past]

1. Guilt becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values. Suppose I value my ability to teach and communicate clearly... clear communication has become an absolute value for me, a center of value that makes all my other values valuable...then if I fail in teaching well, I am stricken with neurotic guilt.
2. Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.

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Boredom/Emptiness [idolatry and the present]

1. "To be bored is to feel empty, [meaningless.] Boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries...[when any of those values are lost], boredom becomes pathological and compulsive. My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos. This picture of the self is called despair. The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism," Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds. Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia*, Chap. 6.

Answer:

a. If you are angry: ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry - because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be.

b. If you are fearful or badly worried: ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared - because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be.

c. If you are despondent or hating yourself: ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so 'down' - because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be.

B. Using "Motivational Drives" to identify idols (The "far-idols.")

Read:

An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as a substitute for God. All sorts of things are potential idols...An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero...If this is so, how do we determine when something is... an idol?

1) *As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol...*

--Work, a commandment of God can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one's family are ignored.

--Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside one's own family is cared for.

--Being well liked, a perfect legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means one never risks disapproval.

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2. "Idols are inflated... suggesting that the idol will fulfill the promises for th good life. Idols tend to come in pairs - for example, a nearby idol may be a rising standard of living, but the faraway idol is a semi-conscious belief that material success will wipe away every tear, Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory in No God but God.

'...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: "has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to Your heart's functional trust preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?'

Questions...bring some of people's idol systems to the surface. To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect [out of Me]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success? These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible's conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: who or what "rules my behavior, the lord or an idol?" -- David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair."

We often don't go deep enough to analyze our idol-structures. For example, "money" is of course an idol, yet in another sense, money can be sought in order to satisfy very different, more foundational idols. For example, some people want lots of money in order to control their world and life (such people usually don't spend their money, but save it), while others want lots of money for access to social circles and for making themselves beautiful and attractive (such people do spend their money on themselves!). The same goes for sex. Some people use sex in order to get power over others, in order to feel approved and loved, and others just fo pleasure/comfort. The following outline can be helpful in letting people consider different foundational "idol structures." Dick Keyes calls them "far-idols" as opposed to "near idols." Remember, these are all alternative ways to make ourselves "righteous/worthy":

<u>What We Seek</u>	<u>Price Willing to Pay</u>	<u>Greatest nightmare</u>	<u>Others oft feel</u>	<u>Prob. Emotion</u>
COMFORT (Privacy, lack of stress, freedom)	Reduced productivity	Stress, demands	Hurt	Boredom
APPROVAL (Affirmation, love, relationship)	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
CONTROL (Self-discipline, certainty, standards)	Loneliness; Spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
POWER (Success, winning, influence)	Burdened; Responsibility	Humiliation	Used	Anger

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Circle the thoughts that are lodged in your heart:

Power idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I have power and influence over others.

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am loved and respected by _____."

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life."

Image idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I have a particular kind of look or body image.

Control idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____."

Helping idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, people are dependent on me and need me."

Dependence idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, someone is there to protect me and keep me safe."

Independence idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone."

Work idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am highly productive getting a lot done."

Achievement idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career."

Materialism idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.

Religion idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am adhering to my religion's moral codes and am accomplished in its activities."

Individual person idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, this one person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me."

Irreligion idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality.

Racial/cultural idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior."

Inner-ring idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in."

Family idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me."

Relationship idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, Mr. or Ms. 'Right' is in love with me."

Suffering idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, I am hurting and in a problem because only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt."

Ideology idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if, my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power.

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Discussion Questions

LOOKING BACK (20 Min)

1. Discuss how you did on your goals from last week.
2. Discuss any progress you made in loving your neighbors on your 3x5 card.

LOOKING UP (40 Min)

1. Idolatry diagnostic questions:
 - a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
 - b. What (if I failed or lost it) would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?
 - c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
 - d. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What pre-occupies me?
 - e. What prayer, *unanswered*, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
 - f. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
 - g. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?
 - h. What is an idol and what is the "key" to growth?
2. Summary: Look for common themes in the answers above. Write below what you think are the "*functional*" masters? What things tend to be too important to you?

LOOKING FORWARD (15 Min)

1. List one goal that you have for next week related to applying Lesson 4.
2. List one goal that you have to love one or more of your neighbors on your 3x5 card.
3. How do you need prayer this week?