

Idols of the Heart

By Timothy Keller

Understanding Idolatry

A. The Inevitability of Idolatry

In the first of the Ten Commandments, God prohibits idolatry: “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3). The command asserts that we will either worship God or something else. Notice, it does not envision a third option—there is no possibility of our worshiping nothing. Since we need to worship something, because of how we are created, we cannot eliminate God without creating God-substitutes. Something will capture our hearts and imaginations, becoming the most important concern, value, or allegiance in our lives. So every personality, community, and thought will be based on either God Himself or on some god-substitute, an idol.

B. The Concept of Idolatry

Romans 8 makes it clear that “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:5-6 ESV). At the heart, then, of gospel change is recognizing and changing what we put our minds on. In the Bible, mind and heart are not two different things; they are the core of the being. When Paul says that we have set our minds on the flesh, he is prescribing the condition and preoccupation of our hearts. What has captured our imaginations? What most preoccupies and engrosses the very core of our thinking and dreaming? Whatever occupies our hearts is our way of justifying and proving ourselves. It is our way of developing our own sense of value and worth, and therefore, it is our way of being our own Savior and Lord.

So, what are the things you have set your mind and heart on as ways of self-justification? Whatever it is, if it is not “the things of the Spirit,” it is an idol. To set the mind on the flesh is to put your mind and your heart on something besides Jesus Christ as your functional Savior. An “idol” is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity. Idolatry is not so much wanting bad things as it is turning good things into ultimate things. This means anything can become an idol, including good things, such as career, family, achievement, independence, a political cause, material possessions, certain people in dependence upon you, power and influence, physical attractiveness, romance, human approval, financial security, your place in a particular social circle or institution. David Powlison writes:

. . . that [the] most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart: Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear, and delight? It is a question bearing on the immediate motivation of one’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the

motivation question is the lordship question: who or what “rules” my behavior, the Lord or an idol?¹

An idol, then, is anything more fundamental than God to our happiness, meaning in life, and identity. It is making a good thing into an ultimate thing. Idolatry is the inordinate desire of (even) something good. Idols are not only personal and individual, they are also corporate and cultural. Different societies can make into ultimate values things like the family (“traditional values”) or feelings (romanticism) or the state (communism) or racial superiority (fascism) or rationality (empiricism) or individual will and experience (existentialism) or group identity (postmodernism.)



C. The Power of Idolatry

On the one hand, an idol is an empty “nothing” with no real power to help us and save us (Isa 40:20; 41:6,7). It is only a way we are trying to save ourselves (Isa 44:10-13.) On the other hand, paradoxically, our idols exercise great power and control over us. They enslave us (Jer 2:25). Once we have come to believe that something will really make us happy, then we cannot help ourselves—we must follow our god. Idols demand complete dependence (Isa 44:17); they completely capture our hearts (Ezek 14:1-5). Romans 1:18-25 is the classic New Testament text that explains the results and power of idolatry. Paul shows how all the breakdowns in life—spiritual, psychological, social, cultural—come because we “worship created things rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). The reason we turn to idols is because we want to control our lives, though we know that we owe God everything. “Though they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him” (Rom 1:21). Ironically, however, the things we look to in order to gain control over our lives (instead of serving God) now exercise control over us. Verses 21 and 25 reveal the two results of idolatry to be deception and slavery: deception or a form of denial that comes with the spiritual addiction of idolatry (“their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened”), and slavery because “they worshiped and served created things.” Whatever we worship we will have to serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together.

D. The Importance of Discerning Idols

Idols are the deeper patterns of “the flesh” that we must discern beneath our behavioral sins. Idolatrous desires for power or approval or self-control or pleasure or comfort are roots of the flesh that can continue to control our lives even as religious people. Though we may refrain from external sinful activities, the root motivations of pride, envy, and fear can still be the impetus of our religious activities in particular and our behavior in general.

¹ David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair’,” Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) Online: <http://www.ccef.org/idols-heart-and-vanity-fair> (October 16, 2009).

Here's a perfect example: I once knew a young man who was very sexually active. After he professed to become a Christian, he entered our campus fellowship and soon, despite outward profession and pure behavior, was wreaking havoc everywhere. In every small group Bible study, he dominated the discussion. In every conversation, he was argumentative and insistent he was always right. Soon it became clear that the real thing he had set his heart on was power over others. Originally it had expressed itself through sexual conquests. Now it was seeking power through evangelism and teaching the Bible. While in the latter case he was technically obeying all the moral rules, inside he was still worshiping the idol of power; he was still getting his significance and security out of controlling the lives of others. He had repented for his sexual sin, but he had not gone deeper to identify the idols of his heart.

The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a rare sin only among primitive people). Rather, idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong. Why do we ever 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 that there is always something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, that is more important to our hearts than God, and that is enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. For example, we would not lie unless first we had made something—human approval, reputation, power over others, financial advantage—more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace of God. So the secret to change is always to identify and dismantle the basic idols of the heart.

I remember counseling two men who had both lost their jobs because of an unfair action by a supervisor. One of the men forgave his boss and moved on and was doing very well. The other man could not move past it; he stayed bitter and cynical, and it affected his future career path. Some people tried to help him by working directly on his emotions. The more sympathy people showed him, the more he felt justified in his anger, his self-pity grew, and he got worse. Other people tried to work directly on his will ("get past it and move on"). That did not work either. The gospel is different. It does not work directly on the emotions, saying "God loves you in some general way" (although He does). The gospel also does not work directly on the will, saying that you have to do the right thing (although you do). The gospel asks, "What is functioning in the place of Jesus Christ as your real, functional salvation and Savior?" What are you looking to in order to justify yourself? One man looked to his career to prove himself, and when something went wrong, he felt absolutely condemned. He was paralyzed because the very foundations of his identity were falling apart. His career was his way of self-salvation. It was not just that he had to forgive his boss; his real problem was that something besides Jesus Christ was functioning as his Savior. There is always something underneath our inordinate and out-of-control problems, desires, patterns, attitudes, and emotions. Until we find out what they are, we cannot have life and peace. Things will fall apart in our lives; it is called death.

In the gospel, we have the support to be honest about what needs to be changed. We also have a method to identify what we have set our minds on so that we can understand where we need to change. What if you technically believe that there is now no condemnation and that you are loved, but what your boss says is more real to you than what the King of the Universe says? Your

boss is on video, but the King of the universe is on audio. You know with your head but not with your heart.

Now we can also see that the gospel is not an elementary principle that we grasp when we are newly saved, and then we go on to discover and live by more advanced biblical principles. No, rather, since all sin is rooted in idolatrous attitudes and idols are always pseudo-saviors, then unbelief in the gospel of Christ is always the major root of every actual sin. The gospel is that I am saved not by my own righteousness and behavior, but because I am righteous in Christ. All our failures in actual righteousness come from a failure to rejoice in our legal righteousness—in Christ. All our failures in sanctification (living a Christ-like, godly life) come from a lack of orientation to our justification. And therefore we will never change unless we come to grips with the particular, characteristic way in which our hearts are resisting the gospel and continuing self-salvation projects through idolatry.

E. Idolatry and the Gospel

1. Wisdom from Martin Luther

No one understood this better than Martin Luther. In his *A Treatise on Good Works*, an exposition of the Ten Commandments, Luther said something that changed my life. He said the first law of the Old Testament law—that you must have no other gods before God—and the New Testament teaching of justification by grace through faith alone are both, in essence, the same thing. To say you must have no other gods but God and to say you must not try to achieve your salvation without Christ is the same thing. Why would that be?

Anything you look to more than Christ for a sense of acceptability, joy, significance, hope, and security is by definition your “god,” something you adore and serve with your whole life and heart. If you try to achieve your sense of self by a performance (as I have often done with my work and ministry), then you are putting something in the place of Christ as a Savior. That is an idol by definition. The sign of idolatry is always inordinate anxiety, inordinate anger, and inordinate discouragement. Idols are good things (family, achievement, work, career, romance, talent, etc.) that we turn into ultimate things in order to get the significance and joy we need. Then they drive us into the ground because we have to have them. If we lose a good thing, it makes us sad. If we lose an idol, it devastates us.

Luther concluded from his study of the commandments that we never break one of the other commandments unless we are also breaking the first one. Idolatry, then, is the fundamental root of our sins and problems. He says we don’t lie, commit adultery, or steal unless first we are making something more fundamental to our hope and joy and identity than God. When we lie, for example, it is because our reputation (or money or whatever) is more foundational to our sense of self and happiness than the love of Christ is. We always sin when we trust something besides Jesus to be our real, functional trust and savior. Let me give you some illustrations.

2. Examples from My Pastoral Ministry

Many years ago as a young minister, I counseled two women in my church. They had very similar problems. Both had teenage sons who were beginning to get into trouble. Both had husbands who were not being good fathers and who were not spending time with their sons. Both women came to me confessing great anger and resentment toward their husbands, who, they felt, were responsible for what was happening to their sons. In both cases I sat down with them and showed them the places in the Bible that calls all Christians to forgive no matter what. I showed them Luke 17, which asserts that we must forgive “seventy times seven.” I said that Jesus had forgiven us, and I called on them to forgive their husbands and let go of their anger. But two different things happened. The first woman was a newer Christian and had a very irresponsible husband. She read the Scripture passages and turned to God for help and prayed and got rid of her anger and softened her heart toward her husband and found relief. But the second woman had been a Christian longer and also had (what I thought was) a husband who was not all that bad. But this woman simply could not let go of her anger at all. She remained deeply bitter.

Years later I looked back and realized what the difference was and the mistake I made. Both women loved their sons, but the second woman had made her son the very center of her whole life. She was a believer; one could even say she was very strong and sound in her commitment. But her son’s love was far more important functionally to her than the relatively abstract concept of Jesus’ love. Deep in her heart she was saying something like, “If I am a good mother, then my life is worthwhile. If my son is happy and doing well, then my life has been worth it. But if he is going astray or has rejected me, then I cannot receive life joyfully—I feel no happiness in life at all.” But anything you add to Jesus Christ as an absolute requirement for happiness is functionally your Savior, even though you would never call it that. Mother-love is a good thing! Loving her son was a good thing. But she had turned him into the ultimate thing, and therefore when her son was struggling, her anxiety could not be remedied; rather, it became blinding fear, and when her husband was not helping, her anger could not be assuaged—it became irresolvable rage.

She could not deal with her lack of forgiveness unless she would have gone down underneath it and seen the idolatry that was the reason she couldn’t forgive. As Luther said, you don’t sin unless you are making something besides Jesus Christ your real salvation, unless you are forgetting the gospel and trying to achieve your salvation without him. So at the root of all sin is failure to really “get” the gospel in the deep places of the heart. At the root of any particular sin is some idolatry—of making something besides Jesus your real salvation instead of resting and rejoicing in how Jesus has achieved your salvation for you. You won’t make progress unless you can identify what those idols are.

A second example follows: When you first get married you stay on your best behavior for a while, but after a while you can’t really keep it up. You just start to act like yourself—since your spouse is always around. And soon your spouse sees things in you that you’ve studiously hidden from pretty much everyone else. For Kathy and I we came to see that we both tended to “twist the truth” (a gentle way to put it!). One of us would hear the other talking on the phone saying we wouldn’t be home then and when he or she hung up the other would say, “That wasn’t exactly true, was it?” We caught each other and fought a bit about it and saw we were both equally bad

in this. But as time went on, we came to realize that we each would “twist the truth” in extremely different situations from one another. For example, someone would say to me, “Did you get to that thing I asked you to do for me?” and I would say, “Yes, I have—I’ll get it to you soon.” But actually I had forgotten all about it! The lie came out of my mouth instinctively. The fact is, however, that my wife would never lie in that situation. She’d just say, “I forgot all about it and you.” This is not to say she was simply more honest than me. She simply doesn’t care that much what people think of her. I am far more concerned about approval and my reputation than she is.

Now she has her own idols—but I’m not here to confess her sins. Let’s finish with mine. I came to realize I would never grow in honesty and integrity and courage simply by shaming myself or telling myself, “Bad Christian! And you’re a minister!” Rather, I saw that my idol was this need for human approval that was at the root of all my “truth-twisting.” In other words, I believed the gospel in my head, but at the moment I fudged on the truth I was not believing the gospel of grace. To the degree I rejoice in God’s approval of me in Christ, to that degree I can simply be honest without fear.

3. Pseudo Saviors

So Luther is right. We sin. But why do we sin in the particular instances and ways that we do? Why do we fail to forgive, not control our temper, tell lies, or lash out in the particular instances that we do? For example, let’s say a person cheats on his income tax form. Why does he do that? Well, you say, because he is a sinner. Yes, but why does his sin take this particular form? (Many other sinners don’t cheat on their income tax returns.) Luther’s answer would be that the man cheated because somehow money and possessions—and the status or comfort from having more of them—was more important to his heart’s significance and security than what he had in Christ. We sin because we are not at that place and moment believing the gospel. The solution is not simply to force ourselves or scare ourselves into doing the right thing, but to use the gospel on the idols of the heart. Idols are always an alternate form of self-salvation apart from Jesus.

Now we can also see that the gospel is not an elementary principle that we grasp when we are saved and then we go on to discover and live by more advanced biblical principles. No. Rather, since all sin is rooted in idolatrous attitudes, and idols are always pseudo-saviors—something we trust more than Christ for our significance and security—then unbelief in the gospel of Christ is always a major root of every actual sin. The gospel is that I am saved not by my own righteousness and behavior, but because I am righteous in Christ. All our failures in actual righteousness come from a failure to rejoice in our legal righteousness in Christ. All our failures in sanctification (living a Christ-like, godly life) come from a lack of orientation to our justification. And therefore we will never change unless we come to grips with the particular, characteristic way in which our heart is resisting the gospel and continuing its self-salvation project through idolatry.

4. Two Disclaimers

First of all, don’t discount self-control. This does not mean that Christians should not use every possible means to exercise self-control in the crucial moment. If you feel an impulse to pick up a rock and hit someone with it, of course, you must do all that is necessary to keep yourself from

doing it! Tell yourself “I’ll go to jail! I’ll disgrace my family!” Anything. There’s no reason why in the short run a Christian can’t simply use willpower like that to make a change that is necessary. But in the long run, change will only come from changing the heart’s deepest affections with the melting, moving grace of God. Titus 2:11-14 says that it is the “grace of God that teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness...and live self-controlled lives.” The ultimate way to shape the life into self-control is to use the gospel of grace. Moving the heart with the gospel is how we really change.

Secondly, *don’t expect simple solutions*. This does not mean that change is simply a matter of personal prayer and repentance. The idolatrous patterns, extremely deep-rooted and complex, did not arise in us through merely individual choice. They are a product of what has been done to us, both in our upbringing and in our social surroundings. Getting the gospel to “go down deep” takes far more than personal prayer and resolutions. Counseling, community, intimate friendships and accountability—all of this is crucial for personal change! But if you want to see a pattern in your life changed in any lasting way, it is not enough to have friends exhorting you or even to uncover childhood patterns of insecurity through self-reflection. You must apply the gospel to your heart at the point of your idols. Otherwise there will be no heart change, no lasting change.

F. The Construction of Idol Systems

How do the particular idol systems come to be formed in us? How do we come to have our specific idols?

1. The Interaction of the Personal, the Cultural, and Spiritual.

The world, the flesh, and the devil (1 John 2:16-17) are inextricably linked in their influences to produce idols in us. First, our “flesh,” our sinful heart is by nature an “idol factory” (as Calvin put it). Second, the “world,” our social environment, coaxes us into various idols by model and example and sometimes direct appeal. Our family’s idols, our culture’s idols, our class’s idols shape us either in our embracing of their idols or in our rejecting of them for something else. Third, the “devil” works in us to stir up and enflame desires into idolatrous bondages. If we leave out any one of the three aspects, we will reduce behavior to simplistic labeling: either “Johnny is bad” or “Johnny is abused” or “Johnny is sick.” But simplistic labeling is not what the Bible describes. None of our behavior is simply the result of only our inherent nature or our environment or our free choice. The Bible is not essentialist (“He was born that way; it is hopeless”), behaviorist (“He is a victim of what they did to him; it’s hopeless”), or existentialist (“It’s all a matter of his choice; he can be whatever he wants to be!”) Idolatry can therefore be a useful way to understand very complex, pathological personal and relational patterns of life.

2. The Combination of “Far” and “Near” Idols.

“Far idols” such as power, approval, comfort, and control are more subtle and basic. They are at the roots of your life—farther from the surface of things. They are motivational drives. They can work through many “near” idols. They are addressed mainly by a process of repenting and rejoicing. “Near idols” are more concrete and specific objects and subjects such as your spouse or your career. Now these things—your business, your ministry, your music—are extremely good

things that you need to detach from the far idols, which are using them. That means they often (even ordinarily) may remain in your life, if they are put in their proper place. This is what Augustine meant when he spoke of the “right ordering of our loves.”

3. The Creation of a “Delusional Field” of Inordinate Desires.

Idols spin out a whole set of assumptions, false definitions of success and failure, false senses of happiness and sadness and worth. This is critical to understand. There is legitimate sorrow, and then there is idolatrous, inordinate, inconsolable sorrow, that is really the curse of the idol. It is saying, “If you don't have me there IS nothing else that can satisfy you!” There is legitimate guilt, and then there is un-remediable guilt. When people say: “I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself,” they mean that they have failed an idol, whose standards are different than God's and whose approval is more important to them than God's.

So you should always look hard at your deepest, more overwhelming negative emotions, such as great anger, paralyzing fear, deep despondency. Ask “Why am I so upset?” Far idols give franticness to our work with near idols. Often, after we become Christians (or after we get serious about our Christianity) we will have a period of disorientation, even a lapse in intensity, as we lose our old idolatrous motivations and learn gradually to pursue our ministry, marriage, and work for Christ's sake. But that is an extremely important transition. Jonathan Edwards insisted that only when we detach our work from far idols do we actually do the work for its own sake. True virtue is to love your work for its own sake, or your spouse for his/her own sake. And you are free to do so in the gospel, because now you love God for his own sake, not just to get heaven and reward from him. That is what the fullness of grace does. Without the gospel, you will do your work to get a name for yourself or to prove yourself, not for the sake of the work itself.

G. Examples of Personal Idols²

1. **Work.** Work becomes the thing you live for—to be productive and useful, or to feel successful and powerful.
2. **Codependence.** Because you need to feel needed, you stay in unhealthy relationships with perennially needy individuals.
3. **Beauty and Image.** This can have various forms, including eating disorders; excessive time, effort, and concern about appearance; the false intimacy of pornography and other anonymous sex; the romantic idol. (This is not the same as pure sexual gratification. You live for crushes or for the dream of some true love that will fix everything.)
4. **Family.** Family as idolatry has many variations: your children's prospects and happiness become the most important thing, or meeting your parents' expectations become the most important thing, or getting married or having a “perfect” marriage becomes the most important thing.
5. **Money.** Money as idolatry has many variations: having (and saving) a lot of money may be your security, the main way you feel safe in the world; or having (and spending) a lot of money may be the main way of feeling significant and important.

²This is only illustrative, not exhaustive.

6. **Control.** Control reveals itself in several manifestations, such as perfectionism (being able to control yourself) and anxiety (being unable to control your circumstances). It's the underlying need to keep complete control of your life.

H. Examples of Social/Cultural Idols

1. **Communism.** Communism makes an idol of the state. Government will solve all problems rather than God. Marx said everything is political, and all problems are political/economic ones, rather than spiritual ones.
2. **Populism.** Makes an idol out of public opinion or majority rule, rather than what God says is right.
3. **Capitalism.** Capitalism makes an idol out of the free market. Like communism, it views all our problems as economic ones and all issues in cost-benefit terms. Even people are viewed as "commodities."
4. **Humanism.** Enlightenment or "humanism" makes an idol of reason and scientific investigation. Science has an answer for everything, and reason will open all doors.
5. **Individualism.** Individualism makes an idol out of individual freedom. Nothing must curb the individual's freedom to choose whatever he or she desires in his or her pursuit of happiness and purpose.
6. **Traditionalism.** Traditionalism makes the family and tradition an idol. Traditional cultures see the rights of individuals as unimportant compared to the name and interests of the family and tribe.

The Healing of Idols

A. Identifying Your Own Idols

1. Using Problem Emotions to Identify Idols.

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. If you are fearful or badly worried, ask, "Is there something *too* important to me? Is that why I am so scared, because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?" If you are despondent or hating yourself, ask, "Is there something *too* important to me? Is that why I am so despondent, because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?"

2. Using Motivational Drives to Identify Idols.

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 or "far" idols. For example, some people want a lot of money in order to control their world and life (such people usually don't spend their money, but save it), while others want a lot

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, while some use sex in order to feel approved and loved; still others use sex simply for pleasure or comfort.

The following analytical tools can be helpful in determining one's foundational idol structures. Additional diagnostic questions are included in the Appendix.

WHAT WE SEEK	PRICE WILLING TO PAY	GREATEST NIGHTMARE	OTHERS OFTEN FEEL	PROBLEM EMOTION
Power (<i>success, winning, influence</i>)	Burdened, responsibility	Humiliation	Used	Anger
Approval (<i>affirmation, love, relationship</i>)	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
Comfort (<i>privacy, lack of stress, freedom</i>)	Reduced productivity	Stress, demands	Hurt	Boredom
Control (<i>self-discipline, certainty, standards</i>)	Loneliness; spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry

B. Dismantling Your Own Idols

“Mortification,” or putting to death “the misdeeds of the body,” is basically repenting of our worship of idols (cf. Judges 10:10-16 and Romans 8:13). We have been worshiping an idol and rejecting the true God. Every idol is the center of some system of works-righteousness by which we are seeking to earn our salvation, in a sense, trying to be our own Savior. So we must repent. But this actually gives much hope—it means there is something we can do. How do we repent? First, we need to get specific. In prayer, name these things to God: “Lord, these are the things I have built my life and heart around...” Secondly, we need to unmask the idols. Idols create delusions. They appear more wonderful or all powerful than they really are. They lead us to deny their hold on us. Stand back and put them into perspective. In what ways are your idols distorting your thinking or hiding themselves from you? (For example: “My idol of status and money has made me deny how much I hate my job and how much happier I would be in another, but lower paying, career.”)

1. Recognize How Weak They Are (in Themselves)

In prayer, confess that these things are good, but finite and weak, and praise God for being the only source of what you need, such as, “Lord, this is a good thing, why have I made it to be so absolute? Why do I feel so pointless without it? What is this compared to you? If I have you, I don’t have to have this! This cannot bless me and love me and help me like you! This is not my life—Jesus is my life! This is not my righteousness and worthiness. It cannot give me that. But you can and have!” Write out such a prayer in your own words.

2. Recognize How Dangerous They Are (to You)

Idols enslave, and they will never be satisfied. Realize how they increasingly destroy you. Look, and now in prayer confess that these things are absolutely lethal, and ask a strong

God for his help. Sample prayer language: “Lord, why am I giving this so much power over me? If I keep doing it, it will strangle me. I don’t have to do so—I will not do so any longer. I will not let this jerk me around on a leash any longer. This will not be my Master—you are my only King.” Write out such a prayer in your own words.

3. Recognize How Grievous They Are (to Christ)

Idols ultimately are cruel to the heart of the one who offers us so much and at such infinite cost. Realize that when you pine after idols (in your anger, fear, despondency), you are saying: “Lord, you are not enough. This is more beautiful, fulfilling, and sweet to my taste than you. You are negotiable, but this is not. Despite all you’ve done for me, I will only use you as long as you help me get this. You are negotiable, but this is not. You haven’t done enough for me—if you don’t help me have this, I will discard you.” In prayer, admit how deeply you have grieved and devalued Jesus, and ask forgiveness. Sample prayer language: “Lord I see how repulsive this idol for what it is—an idol. In yearning after this, I have trampled on your love for me. I realize now that the greatest sin in my life is a lack of thankfulness, a lack of grateful joy for what you have done for me.” Write such a prayer in your own words.

C. Resting your Identity in Christ

1. The Importance of Rejoicing in Christ

Idolatry is a grievous sin; it is the turning away from the beauty, love, and joy of Christ. Therefore, we cannot complete the process of change until we turn from our idols and turn to Christ. He offers what we have been seeking elsewhere. He “stands at the door” knocking (Rev 3:20), seeking a far deeper connection of intimacy with us than he has had previously. Setting the mind and heart on things above (Col 3:1-3) means an appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done and offers us. It means rejoicing that our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). It is this superior joy and rest that will replace the idols—the lesser joys—of our hearts. If we uproot the idols, yet fail to “plant” Christ in their place, the idols will reappear and reposition themselves back in our hearts.

Rejoicing and repentance must go together. Repentance without rejoicing will lead to despair. Rejoicing without repentance is shallow and will only provide passing inspiration instead of deep change. Indeed, it is when we rejoice over Jesus’ sacrificial love for us most fully that, paradoxically, we are most truly convicted of our sin. When we repent out of fear of consequences, we are not really sorry for the sin but for ourselves. Fear-based repentance (“I better change or God will get me”) is really self-pity. In fear-based repentance, we don’t learn to hate the sin for itself, and it doesn’t lose its attractive power. We only learn to refrain from it for our own sake. But when we rejoice over his sacrificial, suffering love for us—seeing what it cost him to turn us from sin—we learn to hate the sin for what it is in itself. So the thing that most assures us of God’s unconditional love (Jesus’ costly death) is the thing the most convicts us of the evil of sin. Fear-based repentance makes us hate ourselves. Joy-based repentance makes us hate the sin.

Rejoicing in Christ is also crucial to repenting for idols, because we must remember that idols are usually good, worthwhile things. We make idols out of work and family, for example. We should not, therefore, learn to hate these “near idols.” We don’t want to love our work and family less. We want to love Christ so much more, and we want to hate the “far idols” (the self-saving need for power, approval, etc.) that keeps us enslaved. Therefore, joy, glory, and a sense of God’s beauty are crucial to deep-seated, transforming gospel change.

In Colossians 3:1-3 Paul says that we must set our minds on things above “for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Let me illustrate this. Some years ago I came to know a woman who had a pretty severe emotional problem. She had a very deep need for male affection. She needed it so much that she took it from virtually any man who offered it. As a result, she fell into many abusive relationships from which she could not break free. After she became a Christian and while going to a nearby counselor, she began to attend my church. I got to know her a bit during this time, and her spiritual growth taught me a lot. She recounted her meetings with her counselor: “I’m going to my counselor and much of what she has said is right. My counselor said I have built my very significance and acceptability and identity on men. That’s why I’ve been defenseless with them. I simply have needed them too much. All of that is right and helpful. I hadn’t seen that.” But she went on, “However, my counselor doesn’t have a very good solution for me. She says that what I should do instead is to get myself a great career—get an education, have a successful career—and then I’ll feel good about myself. Well, my counselor means well, and of course I do need to get some training and get myself a job and career. But what she’s asking me to do is to feel better about myself by doing that. But that would mean I would switch from one kind of idol to another. For many years my heart has been looking at men and saying, ‘Unless I am successful at love, I’m nothing.’ But the therapist wants me to look at my career and say ‘Unless I am a successful, independent woman who is in control of my own life, I am nothing.’ I don’t want to be as enslaved to my work as I was to men. I am being asked to exchange a typically female idol for a typically male idol. But I want neither.”

I asked her how she was going to get that kind of freedom. Her answer was Colossians 3: “Your life is now hidden with Christ in God... When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory.” She said, “It’s very practical; I look at men and I say ‘I’m glad to know you—but you are not my life; Christ is my life! I’m done making anything else my life. You are a good thing but not an ultimate thing. I would love to have a husband, but if I don’t have one, I’ve got Jesus and his people. I set my mind on things above. You can’t give me any of the things he can give and has given me.’ See—I don’t want to look to men or to a career. A career can’t die for me! If I live for a career and fail, it will just beat me up all my life for having been a failure. But if I fail Jesus, he died for me to forgive me.”

2. What is Rejoicing in Christ?

But we have to get even more practical. How do we melt the heart by looking to Jesus rather than just bending it temporarily by fear and pride? The key is worship. If change were mainly a matter of behavior, mainly a matter of taking biblical principles and putting them into practice, then the key to change would be teaching and instruction and maybe counseling. But if our main problem is that Jesus’ love is not real to our hearts, then we will only be liberated through

worship. It is an appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done and offers us that will dethrone the idol. Notice how often growth and change is a dynamic of two interactive processes: “put to death” (repentance) and “set your mind” (rejoicing). See Colossians 3:1-9, Romans 8:6-13, and Hebrews 12:1-3. These are not really two separable things. Only rejoicing in Christ strengthens us to admit the worst about ourselves in repentance. On the other hand, only the sight of our sin reveals to us how free and unmerited his grace is. Rejoicing and repentance must go together. Repentance without rejoicing will lead to despair. Rejoicing without repentance is shallow and will only provide passing inspiration instead of deep change.

What does it mean to rejoice or “set your mind” on Christ? In the Bible, the meaning of rejoicing is much deeper than simply being happy about something. Paul directed that we “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4), but this cannot mean always feeling happy, since he also said that every day he was weighed with concern and anxiety over his flock (2 Cor 11:28-29). Jesus forbid his disciples to rejoice in their power over demons and insisted that they rejoice over their salvation (Luke 10:20). What you rejoice in is the thing that is your central sweetness and consolation in life. To rejoice is to treasure a thing, to assess its value to you, to reflect on its beauty and importance until your heart rests in it and tastes the sweetness of it.

So rejoicing is a way of praising God until the heart is sweetened and rested and until it relaxes its grip on anything else it thinks it needs. The rejoicing is thus not strictly a second distinct step after repentance, but rather it completes the repentance. Why? In Christian repentance we do not take our sins to Mount Sinai, but to Mount Calvary. Sinai represents only the law of God and makes us fear that God will reject us. But Calvary represents both the law of God and his commitment to save us no matter what—even if his Son has to fulfill and pay our debt to the law. Going to Sinai with our sins means we use the painful fear of rejection to motivate us to change. Going to Calvary with our sins means we use gratitude for his love to motivate us to change.

A note of warning is in order here. Romans 8:13 admonishes us to destroy and root out our fleshly way of living, our self-salvation projects, by the Spirit. This is where we move away from pure technique. We are not completely in control here; we cannot just pick up the Holy Spirit and start to use it like a pair of scissors. “Minding” is more than thinking. It means that our whole hearts, minds, and beings are to be enthralled and captivated by something. Jesus Christ says that when the Holy Spirit comes, he will take Jesus’ teachings and manifest them to us. The Holy Spirit’s job is to make the teachings real to us, to smite us with the beauty of Jesus Christ and what he has done until what he says about us is more real than what anybody else says. The only way I will ever have self-control and be able to handle the troubles of life is if the ministry of the Holy Spirit makes what Jesus Christ has done for me so real that I weep with the beauty of it. Only that will replace those other things in the core of my being.

C. How Do I Rejoice in Christ?

To replace idols so they cannot grow back, we must learn to rejoice in the particular thing that Jesus brings that replaces the particular idol. Whenever you see your heart in the grip of some kind of disobedience or misery, some temptation, anxiety, anger, etc., always ask:

- How are these effects being caused by an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me what only Jesus can really give me?
- How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere?
- Then rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you.

Here are some examples:

1. If You Struggle With Temptation

Often temptation is a near idol linked to a far idol of comfort. Let Jesus entice you with his life. Rejoice in the gospel until you see its beauty. How are these temptations being caused by an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me the comfort and consolation that only Jesus can really give me? How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him entice you with his beauty.

Sample rejoicing prayer for times of temptation: “Lord, only in your presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11), yet here I am trying to find comfort in something else. Why rake in a mud puddle when you have set a table for me (Psalm 23:5) filled with your love, peace, joy? This thing I am tempted by is just a pleasure that will wear off so soon; it is a sham and cheat, while your pleasure, though it may start small, will grow on and on forever (Proverbs 4:18). Remove my idols of pleasure, which never can give me the pleasure I need.”

A meditation for rejoicing in Jesus (and the gospel) when tempted: John 6:5-13, 32-40. See Jesus feeding people with his bread, the only bread that will not leave you hungry. Meditate on John 6 and write out a rejoicing prayer that replaces temptation thoughts.

2. If You Struggle With Anxiety

Often, anxiety is a result of the far idol of control. Let Jesus comfort you with his care. Rejoice in the gospel until you are humbled enough (to see you don't know best) or valued enough (to see that he could not forget you). How are these anxieties being caused by an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me the control over my life and environment only Jesus can really give me? How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him quiet you with his loving power.

Sample rejoicing prayer for times of anxiety: “Lord, I live by your sheer grace. That means though I don't deserve to have things go right, yet I know you are working them all out for good (Rom 8:28) because you love me in Christ. All my punishment fell into Jesus' heart, so you only allow bad things for my growth and for loving, wise purposes. I can relax, because my security in life is based neither on luck nor hard work but on your gracious love for me. You have counted every hair on my head (Matthew 10:30-31) and every tear down my cheeks (Psalm 56:8). You love me far more and better than anyone else loves

me or than I love myself. Remove my idols of security, which never can give me the security I need.” Pray this prayer when anxious or one you write out yourself.

A meditation for rejoicing in Jesus (and the gospel) when anxious: Luke 8:22-25; Mark 4:35-41. See Jesus assuring his disciples of his care. Meditate on this and write out a prayer that replaces anxious thoughts.

3. If You Struggle With Anger and Pride

Often anger and pride result from the desire for power. Let Jesus humble and soften you with his mercy. Rejoice in the gospel until your heart is melted of its pride by the humbling grace and work of Jesus. How are this anger and hardness being caused by an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me the power and significance that only Jesus can really give me? How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him humble and soften you with his grace and mercy.

Sample rejoicing prayer for times of anger: “Lord, when I forget the gospel, I become impatient and judgmental of others. I forget that you have been infinitely patient with me over the years. You are slow to anger and rich in love (Psalm 145:8). When I am anything other than tender-hearted and compassionate to people around me, I am like the unmerciful servant, who, having been forgiven an infinite debt, is hard toward his fellow debtor (Matt 18:21-35). I live completely and solely by your grace and long-suffering mercy, and I praise you for it. Tenderize my heart toward others as I do so. And remove the idol of power—the need to get my own way—which is making me so hard toward these people.” Pray this prayer when irritable and angry or one you write out yourself.

A meditation for rejoicing in Jesus (and the gospel) when cold or angry: Matthew 26:36-46. See Jesus being let down by his disciples, but still giving them credit for their willing spirits (Matt 26:41). Remember that you have fallen asleep on him so often. Meditate on this and write out a prayer that replaces hard-hearted thoughts:

4. If You Struggle With Rejection and a Sense of Worthlessness

Often this results from a desire for approval. Let Jesus assure you of his love. Rejoice in the gospel until you are affirmed. How is this despondency being caused by an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me the sense of approval that only Jesus can really give me? How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him assure you with his fatherly love.

Sample rejoicing prayer: “Lord, when I forget the gospel, I become dependent on the smiles and evaluation of others. I let them sit in judgment on me and then I hear all their criticism as a condemnation of my very being. But you have said, ‘Now there is no condemnation’ for me (Rom 8:1). You delight and sing over me (Zeph 3:14-17), you see me

as a beauty (Col 1:22). Why do I pant after the approval of the serfs when I have the love of the King? Ironically, I am being a lousy friend, because I am too hurt by criticism to either learn from it or give it to others (for fear of getting it back). Oh, let me be so satisfied with your love (Psalm 90:14) that I no longer respond to people in fear of displeasing them, but in love, committed to what is best for them. Remove my idols of approval, which can never give me the approval I need.” Pray this prayer when feeling hurt and rejected or one you write out yourself.

A meditation for rejoicing in Jesus (and the gospel) when hurt or rejected: John 15:9-17 and 17:13-26. Listen to how Jesus talks about you to his Father. Think of what you mean to him, what he is willing to do for you. Meditate on this and write out a prayer that replaces despondent thoughts.

It should be clear how to reflect on your heart in such a way that you can deal with its idolatrous motions and effects. You may have other problems besides the four mentioned above. For example, you may have a particular problem with guilt over the past or with boredom in general and so on.

Follow the same pattern you see above:

- What is the “far idol” motivation (e.g. power, approval)?
- What is the “near idol” it is attached to (e.g. success at work, dating a particular person, ministry)?
- How does Jesus particularly provide what the idols cannot? Pray to him, thanking him for it, and find some passage of Scripture in which he very visibly and concretely demonstrates this gift or quality. Meditate on it.

D. “Quick-Strike” Readiness

Essentially, rejoicing in Christ is worship. There is no relief simply by figuring out your idols and saying, “But Jesus gives me peace that this idol cannot.” You have to actually get the peace that Jesus gives, and that only comes as you worship. The specific Rejoicing exercises listed above are just abstractions that will not affect you, unless, as you pray and praise and meditate, the Spirit inscribes these truths on the heart (Eph 1:18ff; 3:15ff). These exercises can give you the truths you need, but through the Spirit you have to “pray them in.” That takes time. It is a process.

So it is not enough to spend time repenting and rejoicing in fixed times of solitude and prayer. You must also “catch” your heart falling into idolatry during the day, and you must draw on your hard work of reflection by learning to quickly strike your heart back into shape with the two-pronged tool of repenting and rejoicing. This means that you should have a series of “quick strike” prayers that go against your main idols and negative patterns that may happen during the day. (You may wish to write these prayers out on a card.) Often the prayers might be accompanied by a Bible passage or verse. The following are examples of what I mean by “quick strikes.”

1. Deep Humility (vs. Pride)

Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored? Repent like this: Jesus on the cross made himself of no reputation and gave up all his power—so we could have his name put upon us and rule with him. Consider free grace of Jesus until I sense a) decreasing disdain (since my gifts and accomplishments are all gifts anyway), and b) decreasing pain over criticism (since I don't need human recognition when I have God's.) In light of his grace I can let go of the need to keep up a good image and reputation—it is too great a burden and now unnecessary. Consider free grace until I experience grateful restful joy.

2. Burning Love (vs. Indifference)

Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed and so indifferent and inattentive to people? Repent like this: Jesus was gentle and affirming with us when we indifferently went to sleep on him in the garden. On the cross he was loving us even when we were absent or mocking. Now his love enables kindness to those who are not being sensitive to us. Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is no more coldness or unkindness (think of the sacrificial love of Christ for you), no more impatience (think of his patience with you), no further indifference. Consider free grace until I show warmth and affection. God was infinitely patient and attentive to me, out of grace.

3. Wise Courage (vs. Anxiety)

Have I forgotten that only by his grace I have what I have, that this position I've gotten wasn't me, and maintaining it is not up to me? Have I remembered that Jesus has plenty of joy in store for me (that's his way!) even though it may not be the joy I'm so concerned about losing? Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect or been too rash and impulsive? Repent like this: Jesus set his face like a flint to go up to Jerusalem and go to the cross—for me. Now his bravery for me melts my heart out of anxiety, since the “dangers” I face are nothing like what he faced for me. Consider the free grace of Jesus till there is a) no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me), and b) no anxious or rash behavior (since Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over me—my life is hid with God in Christ). It takes pride to be anxious—I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

4. Godly Motivation (a “Single Eye”)

Am I doing what I am doing for God's glory and the good of others, or am I being driven by fears, need for approval, love of comfort and ease, need for control, hunger for acclaim and power, or the “fear of man”? Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to any of even the first motions of lust or gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent rather than important things because of these inordinate desires? Repent like this: How does Jesus provide for me what I am looking for in these other things?

All we have been trying to say in this last section is well summarized by a few famous lines in a poem by John Donne. Meditate on it and make it a prayer:

*Take me to you, imprison me,
For I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

This article is based on training materials from Redeemer City to City. Please do not use or distribute without prior permission. Copyright © Timothy Keller, Redeemer City to City 2016.