

## **IDOLS OF THE HEART**

### **FUNCTIONAL REALITY VS. CHRIST'S REALITY**

Where does your mind go in times of stress and suffering? I'm asking, what is your first, almost automatic, reaction in times of stress? Be honest. Do you become afraid and feel vulnerable? Do you question what God is doing to you? Do you tend to seek an escape or comfort? Do you launch into control-mode to fix the problem? Let's consider together why certain situations cause you stress?

As Christians, we are called to live at all times in *Christ's Reality*, in both joyful and in stressful times. When life presses in on us, God is drawing us to himself and seeking to conform us to Christ. He is challenging us to come live with him in His reality through the stress and suffering; a reality that is characterized by the security, the providence, the love, and the protection that Christ affords. That is *Christ's Reality*. However, for us humans, living in *Christ's Reality* can be a scary place. The Holy Spirit is constantly calling us to a deeper trust, faith and dependence, a trust that, in many ways is hard to believe.

**PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION:** If *Christ's Reality* is so good, why do we find it a scary place to live? To live fully in *Christ's Reality*, we must challenge our old, sin-laden, habitual ways of believing, thinking and behaving. Our rebellious hearts fight this process. Even though we have been saved, these old habitual ways of thinking/believing/behaving still remain. However, God promises that our hearts will be increasingly transformed and he promises to do this through stress and suffering. That's the project He is up to and that's where he is taking all who believe in Him. It's called progressive sanctification.

**WHY DO WE STRESS AND WORRY?** Many people ask, "Is stress physical? Is it spiritual? Is it mental? The answer is yes! As Christians, we know there is a spiritual element to it as there is in all things; an element that God is asking us to confront when stress strikes. The Bible looks at our humanity holistically, so the mind, body and soul are not separate and distinct parts, working separately from one another. They all work together and each affects the other. Physical factors contribute to anxiety such as diet, exercise, hormonal imbalances and vitamin deficiencies. There also is a spiritual factor in all stress, worry and anxiety that God is calling us to fight. Christ would not have commanded us not to worry if He didn't mean it to be a spiritual issue.

**WHAT IS STRESS?** Stress is a response to a perceived threat. When you hear a loud noise in the middle of the night, your heart pounds, your senses heighten and you are ready for action. Biologists call this the "fight or flight" response; a response that God gave us for survival. However, in today's culture, most of our stressful reactions are not life and death situations but rather situations and circumstances that we "perceive" as threatening, such as loss of security, prestige, approval from others, our comfort and our man-made dreams. The Bible refers to these as "idols of the heart".

**IDOLS OF THE HEART:** Idols are anything that we worship other than God. Idols are good things, given by God, that we turn in to ultimate things. They grow from a "want" to a "must have". Things such as receiving approval from others, financial security, a comfortable lifestyle, our appearance, success and our ego are a few of the most dominant idols in our current times. John Calvin called our hearts "idol factories" meaning that our sinful hearts seek to draw away from God to create and worship other false gods. It's been going on since the beginning of time and it still happens today. All Christians have idols in their hearts that compete with God for supremacy.

One way to understand ourselves and others is to look at the idols of the heart. Stress results when our idols are threatened. If a person seeks approval from others to validate their worth, rejection from others triggers anxiety and depression. Likewise, if financial security becomes a “must have”, then the threat of financial loss is very frightening.

**UNDERSTANDING OUR FUNCTIONAL REALITY:** These idols not only persist in our hearts, they also cause us to form our self-made realities that oppose *Christ’s Reality*. They become our “System-of-Life”, our way of looking at our selves, other people, God and life. These are called *Functional Realities* because we erroneously think they help us function. They are our own distorted view of reality. Our *Functional Reality* is our conclusion of “how things really work in my world... as I perceive it.” We draw conclusions about people, God and ourselves. They develop from our sinful hearts and our experiences over the course of our lifetimes. Our *Functional Realities* are created to support our idols. They are made up of lies, distortions, and mis-beliefs. *Functional Realities* are also a place to hide from God, a perceived “happy place”, even though they cause great stress and anguish. They are realities to hold on to, a way that feels normal to us.

In the First Commandment, God calls us to put no other Gods before him, to worship Him alone. As the Spirit works in us to grow us in holiness and the fullness of Christ, he is breaking us away from our idols and drawing us to worship Him alone. In His providence, He brings about circumstances that require us to challenge our *Functional Realities*. Pastor Tim Keller says that, “meeting the real Jesus is very disruptive to our hearts.” In our sinfulness, we tend to conform God to our *Functional Reality* rather than allowing us to confirm us to His Reality. That is the battle that we all feel raging inside us.

**WHAT IS CHRIST’S REALITY?** *Christ’s Reality* is the true reality. It is characterized by boldly and radically living in the “fullness of Christ”, in the “newness of life” and is built on Truth, with faith in the work that Christ has done on the Cross and belief in the promises of God. Living in *Christ’s Reality* allows God to interpret life for us by his Word and relationships with the people. God is our source of life. *Christ’s Reality* is not a place we comfortably go. It is a radical, risky life and often feels like we are walking through a wall of fire. Paul Tripp calls it the “crisis of belief”. It is how God takes us “from glory-to-glory”. It is a place where we can live an outward life in self-giving love to others.

**CONCLUSION:** *Functional Realities* always ultimately break down. There will be moments in our lives and the lives of people we counsel where it becomes obvious that the *Functional Reality* doesn't work and it starts to be questioned. This is the “teachable moment” where God is leading us to SEE sin more clearly and to repent. Counsel from the outside is timely at these moments. We want to be there to help others to accurately interpret what God is doing. In all things, God is drawing us to himself, helping us to break old patterns and to risk living boldly in reality as He defines it. As Christians, it is our calling to engage with God for our own growth and to help others walk through this process.