

Idols of the Heart

Introduction – Part 1

Idols: the original worship wars.

- *Exodus 20:1-3*

Idols: what are they?

- *Exodus 20:4-5a*

Idols: upstream to the source.

- *Proverbs 4:23; Jeremiah 17:9; Ezekiel 36:26-27*

The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.
(John Calvin)

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Idols of the Heart: Introduction, Part One¹

Think of a person who is troubled with a nagging cough – a cough that is always present. Not hard to imagine for us is it, with the pounds of pollen floating in our air during this time of year. But this guy's cough is there all the time. It keeps him up through the night and he can't make it through a conversation without coughing. His wife convinces him it's time to go to the doctor, so he does.

The doctor runs tests and the results are clear: lung cancer. This guy doesn't even smoke! But the doctor knows how hard the news is going to be on the guy and his wife, so he decides not to tell them what it is. Instead, he writes a prescription for cough medicine and tells him that this should clear up his cough. As you can imagine, the guy is relieved and happy to hear the news. He fills the prescription and quickly begins to sleep better at night.

But behind the scenes, the cancer continues to spread, consuming healthy cells in his lungs and spreading throughout his body.

What's the problem with that story? The doctor treated the symptoms but not the disease.

Pretty much every week, I or one of our pastors has a conversation with folks who are coughing with things like worry. Anxiety. Stress. Being biblically illiterate. Prayerfully mute. Lying. Cheating. Lusting. Whatever it is, they confess their sins. And that's a good and right thing to do. But then, when they do, often times people will point to what they think is the problem. In their minds, they've figured it out – they just need to stop coughing (or whatever it is they are doing). But so many times, they've identified the symptom instead of the true disease – the true issue – which is idolatry.² And we wouldn't be very good pastors if we withheld the diagnosis from you.

Right now I would imagine your insides might be bristling a bit – you are thinking, "Who does he think he is, accusing me of idol worship?" But if the diagnosis fits, please don't fight it. The sooner you accept it, the quicker the healing can begin.

The subject of idol worship seems primitive and obsolete. Most of us don't dance around carved statues of animal-human hybrids. But in the Bible, idolatry is the number one issue, making its way into every book. Fifty of the laws in the first five

¹ Sources: *God's at War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for Your Heart*, Kyle Idleman, Zondervan, 2013 (much of the first two sermons uses material from this source. Direct quotations are cited)

The Baal Conspiracy: An Expose of Everyday Idolatry, Al Truesdale, Beacon Hill Press, 2010
New Beacon Bible Commentary: Exodus, H. Junia Pokrifka, Beacon Hill Press, 2018

² Illustration from Idleman, pgs 16-17

books address this issue, and it's one of only four sins punishable by death. We may not worship wooden images, but our idols are more sophisticated and just as deadly as in the Old Testament. So let's be honest with ourselves and identify the idols of the heart. Because ultimately, this is an issue of Lordship. That's what this series is about.

In the Bible, idolatry isn't just one of many sins; it's the one great sin that all the other sins come from. If you do a little exploratory surgery of whatever your sin is, you'll find the cancer of a false god. And until that cancer is eradicated – until that god is dethroned and Jesus takes his rightful place – you will not have victory. Idolatry isn't *an* issue; it is *the* issue. One author says, "All roads lead to the dusty, overlooked concept of false gods. Deal with life on the glossy outer layers, and you might never see it; scratch a little beneath the surface, and you begin to see that it's always there, under some other coat of paint. There are a hundred million different symptoms, but the issue is always idolatry."³

That's because...

Idols are the original worship wars.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s (and even into the 2000s) the landscape of church worship began to change, and churches began to add newer, more contemporary songs to their liturgy of ancient hymnology. Not everyone liked it, and it sparked a term called "worship wars," which was ironic because both sides fought over which style of worship should be used, when they should have both been focused on their unity in Christ and celebrating it through song. Instead they fought, accused, condemned, and split, killing worship all together. The sad thing is that, in those worship wars, they actually ended up worshiping their style of worship instead of the God the worship was for. Now, I admit that there will always be generational worship differences, But I'm SO very thankful to God for you, West Valley Church: you are committed to Christ and each other, giving preference to each other and especially to our younger generations. You are so good at loving God and each other when it comes to that issue. But we're not talking about *those* worship wars; we are talking about the *original* worship wars – the wars between gods. There is absolutely no shortage of so-called gods who are making war against God, and it's been that way from the beginning of the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden. That's why God said what he did on Mount Sinai when he gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The *very first* commandment from God was this:

And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:1-3, niv)

You might have the mistaken notion that when God said this, the concept of God or gods was a new thing. But when God gave this first command to his people, the people were already familiar with many, many gods. Remember that God's people

³ Ibid, pg 22

had spent more than 400 years in slavery to Egypt, and Egypt's god population was very crowded. There were gods for local districts and nearly every activity. You could literally pick and choose the gods you wanted or needed.

But the God of our Bible is entirely different than that mindset. When God says, "I am Yahweh. You shall have no other gods *before* me," our tendency is to think "before" him means "in front of him," as if it were some kind of hierarchy – as if God is THE god among all the other gods. But that is *not at all* what God is saying. God is saying there are no other gods. Period. Even his name, Yahweh, clearly says this. Remember in Exodus three, Moses asked God how people will know that God was sending him, and God said, "tell them my name is Yahweh." This is the holiest of all names for God; it is THE name for God, and it means, "I am that I am." Meaning, "I exist always. I am present in the moment now, and in every moment." In other words, "I alone am God." So when God said, "You shall have no other Gods before me," another way to translate the term, "before me" is to say, "there are not and will not be any gods in my presence." And where is his presence? Everywhere, in every moment. There are no other gods anywhere. One author says it this way (this is great!): "God declines to sit atop an organizational flow chart. He *is* the organization. He is not interested in being president of the board. He *is* the board. And life doesn't work until everyone sitting around the table in the boardroom of your heart is fired. He is God, and there are no other applicants for that position. There are no partial gods, no honorary gods, no interim gods, no assistants to the regional gods."⁴ There *is no other object of worship that exists*. No other gods. The problem is we have this chronic tendency to create gods.

So if there are no other gods, then...

What are idols? (*Idols: what are they?*)

God isn't telling us not to worship other gods because he's insecure; he's telling us that this is the only way things work. Everything is his creation. "Only one God owns and operates it. Only one God designed it, and only one God knows how it works. He is the only God who can help us, direct us, satisfy us, save us."⁵ But we keep looking for someone else. We keep developing other deities, growing other gods. That's why God went on to say in the next verses of that chapter:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...
(Exodus 20:4-5a, niv)

Do you notice where he says that we can't create an image of anything in heaven above, of earth here, or of the waters below? God is making a powerful statement here. This is the trifecta of life. Heaven, earth, and below the earth. This is

⁴ Ibid, pg 23 (italics added)

⁵ Ibid, 23

everything in all of creation. There is nothing that we can create that doesn't find its origins in the God who created it.⁶ Everything else is counterfeit of the original.

The global trade in counterfeit has been estimated at over 500 billion US dollars annually, just under 3% of all imports. Everything from car parts to cosmetics, pharmaceuticals to plastics, from jewelry to footwear.⁷ Nothing is spared. Not surprisingly, China accounts for 45% of it, whose communist dictatorship uses counterfeits as one way to gain access to more money while destabilizing our economy and destroy us from the inside.

Every false god seeks to destabilize God. Except instead of China, it's you. And me. We make false gods all the time. And any false god we make is a cheap knock off of the original.

But why does God say he is "jealous"? Doesn't that seem like he's weak or insecure? It would if he were like us. But he's not.

When he said, "no other gods before me," that word "before" says more than "no other." It is a word picture. It was a word that described someone carrying out adultery right in front of the other spouse – the ultimate humiliation.⁸ It means that Israel's adultery with other gods is like that. That's why over and over in the Old Testament, idolatry is referred to as adultery.

Now, at this point, you might think "well thanks for the history lesson, but that was a long time ago. We don't make creatures out of wood or metal to worship." And most of the time, you are right about that. You might even think, "Our problem is that people don't worship many gods; our problem is that people don't worship any god." But remember I said that our gods are more sophisticated and just as dangerous? In fact, our list of gods is likely longer than theirs. Just because they don't have the same names doesn't mean they don't exist. Maybe we don't have a god of commerce, or a god of agriculture, or a god of sex, or a god of the hunt. But we do pay attention to our profit portfolios, we are fascinated with food, cars and furnishings and adult entertainment and sports. Sooo.... "if it walks like an idol and quacks like an idol..."⁹ Or maybe I should say, if it coughs like an idol...You can call it a cough instead of cancer, but that won't make it any less deadly.

So what are idols? One of the hard things about identifying them is that ours don't usually come with temples and sacrifices. But another problem is that they come from things that aren't even wrong.

Remember last week when we talked about the passage in John 10, when Jesus said that while Jesus comes to give, life, to the full, the thief comes to do the opposite – to kill, steal, and destroy. Everything God has created for us, the enemy, Satan, seeks to substitute with something else. The enemy knows our propensity to make idols, so he takes the good things in our life and lets us elevate them to god status. Satan's

⁶ Pokrifka, pg 218

⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/05/global-trade-in-fake-goods-reached-USD-467-billion-posing-risks-to-consumer-safety-and-compromising-intellectual-property.html>

⁸ Pokrifka, 217

⁹ Idleman, 24

substitutes. There are things that are morally neutral in your life that don't stay that way. They are originally amoral, but they become immoral. It could be your family or your career, it could even be a worthy cause like feeding the hungry or healing the sick. We easily make idols of it all. You have no idea how easy it is for pastors to make an idol out of their ministry!

Here's the deal, and listen carefully: *the instant that something takes the place of God, the moment it becomes an end in itself rather than something to lay at God's throne, it becomes an idol.*¹⁰ (repeat)

I had a friend in college – he was a covenant brother of mine. The covenant was a group of 12 men in a small group being mentored weekly by one of our professors. We had committed – covenanted – to each other to be fiercely devoted to each other's discipleship. And one of my brothers was a national champion in college wrestling. He'd won state in high school and continued his success at the collegiate national level. We prayed for him and encouraged him because his success gave him a platform to glorify God and tell others the Good News. Until one evening at our weekly gathering, he announced that he was quitting wrestling. For good. He would no longer compete. We were floored and thought he was foolish and began a barrage of questions. But my friend raised his hands to quiet us, and with tears in his eyes he said, "You guys don't understand. I have no other choice. Wrestling has become more important to me than God. I'm worshiping it more than I am him. I've tried to subdue it. I have to slay it." We were stunned and silent. How could we argue with him? He was right. He created an idol, and it had to be destroyed.

The instant that something takes the place of God, the moment it becomes an end in itself rather than something to lay at God's throne, it becomes an idol. Remember your commandments. First: no other gods. Second: no making other gods to worship.

You might think, "You could say that about anything. You could take any issue, anything someone devoted themselves to, and make it out to be idolatry."

Exactly. Anything at all can become an idol once it becomes a substitute for God in our lives.¹¹

I pray – I pray I pray I pray – that as you are hearing these words God is dismantling your worship infrastructure that has supported all the false gods in your world that you have created.

And if you are going to do that, you are going to have to find out why you do it. You need to go...

Upstream to the source.

Think of anything that you are passionate about – anything that means a lot to you, besides God. Then ask yourself why – why does it mean so much to you? If you do,

¹⁰ Ibid, 24

¹¹ Ibid, 26

you'll be getting to the heart of the issue. To describe this more clearly, anything that becomes the purpose or driving force of your life probably points back to idolatry of some kind. So think about what you have pursued and created, and ask yourself, why? If you have a food addiction, why? If you have "hot button" issues that tend to get you upset, why? If you spend countless hours on something – your phone, a hobby, a car, decorating, why?¹²

If you keep following it, you'll arrive at the heart of the problem.

We have lots of beautiful places to hike not far from where we are sitting. Imagine that you are on a hike. It's another one of the hikes we're known for in Washington – lush green forest, clear running streams and waterfalls. But there's something wrong: you notice that someone has dumped a whole bunch of trash in the stream. It looks ugly and you can't just walk away, so you start picking up the garbage – empty soda cans and plastic bottles, paper stuff – it's been there while. There's an ugly film on the surface of the water, too. So you start picking it up and sticking it in a bag you've brought with you. It ends up taking a couple hours, but you finally get it all. You've done your good deed for the environment. But when you come back the next day, it's like you never did anything. It's even worse – more trash than before. Something doesn't make sense – nobody would just come behind you and dump more trash. And it smells so bad, it couldn't have just gotten there in a day. So you decide to follow it upstream. Sure enough, there's a garbage dump that's been there for years. All that your cleaning did was open up a bigger gap for more of it to flow downstream. You could come back every day, but it would be like pushing a boulder uphill. If you want your stream to be clean, you've got to go directly to the source and deal with what's there.¹³

So when you ask yourself that "why" question about how things become idols in your life, if you follow it upstream, you're going to find that the dump is your heart. Your heart is the place that's got to be cleaned up if you're going to get rid of the idols.

This is why the Bible warns us very clearly:

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."
(Proverbs 4:23, niv).

If you look upstream to the source, you'll find it is your heart because everything flows from there. Hundreds of years ago, John Calvin said it best. It's a phrase that you're going to hear a lot throughout this sermon series, and it is this truth:

The human heart is a perpetual idol factory. (John Calvin) *(repeat)*

The reality is that we are excellent idol makers. That's why it comes up so much throughout the entire Bible. It's what the prophets perpetually warned God's people about. Jeremiah the prophet rightly identified the problem when he said:

¹² Ibid, 26

¹³ Ibid, 32-33

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, niv)

Christian: stop dealing with the garbage and go to the source. Stop dealing with the cough and get to the cancer. If you follow upstream of your idols, you’ll find the source and it is your very own heart. The heart is where the war is; it’s where the war is won or lost.

This series this summer is a call to us to be brutally honest. To stop treating the symptom and get to the source of our sin – our idol factory, our own heart.

You know, the “woes” of the pharisees are ours. Jesus warned them – said “woe” to them – about the condition of their hearts. He said they were like whitewashed tombs. They look good on the outside, but on the inside, they were full of dead bones and everything unclean. (Matthew 23:27-28) My friend, you might feel pretty good about how you are doing. You may be successfully treating the symptoms. But your heart is still cranking out idols. You need a change of heart.

Here's the good news: God knows this. He knows the idols you make. He knows the idolc adultery you engage in. Now it might frighten you that he knows all about you – all your hidden secrets. You might feel exposed and embarrassed and ashamed, but don't let that get in the way of the cure. The one who created you has the cure to the idols you create. Like a chemo that breaks things down before you can be built back up, the Holy Spirit will convict you of your sin of idols so you can confess, and repent. He may condemn your creation of idols, but he's got the cure for your heart. Listen to his promise – also from way back in the Old Testament:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27, niv)

God himself – the one who created you in the first place has the cure. He will change your heart if you let him. He made you to be loved by him. He made you to love him back and to love others. That's it. But your heart keeps chasing after other lovers that you've created. He has the cure for your unfaithfulness: your heart is rotten to the core so he's going to give you a new one – a heart transplant. He says “I'm going to do surgery and take out that old diseased idol making heart of yours and delicately, surgically place a new heart that will only beat with love for me. It's like your old heart is stone, but I'll give you a soft, flesh heart that beats in rhythm with mine. A brand new heart!” God will plant in you the very presence of the one who is present in every moment – the Spirit of Yahweh will be your motivation for everything. The Spirit will lead you to worship God, not other things. Other things will find their rightful place in your life – if at all – but nothing will come before your love for Yahweh.

THAT is the promise, and God makes good on his promises if you let him.

This series is about idols, but it's really about worship – about making Jesus the absolute Lord of your life – no substitutes.

Is that what you want? Let's pray.

Benediction:

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.
(1 Timothy 6:15-16, rsv)