

Idols of the Heart

Introduction – Part 2

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Michael W. O'Neill

Idols of the Heart: Introduction, Part Two¹

The subject of idol worship might seem to us like it's primitive and obsolete. After all, 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 books address this issue, and it's one of only four sins punishable by death. In the Bible, idolatry isn't just one of many sins; it's the one great sin that all the other sins come from. So while we may not worship wooden images, the truth of the matter is that our idols are as deadly as they are in the Old Testament – it's just that our idols are more sophisticated. So let's be honest with ourselves and identify the idols of the heart. Because ultimately, this is an issue of Lordship. Jesus is either Lord of all in your life or not at all. That's really what this series called "Idols of the Heart" is about. Next week we will begin looking at some of the idols of the heart, but today we want to see why it's such an important issue.

The reason this is such a big deal to God is because he is...

A jealous God.

We briefly touched on this last week, but we need to unpack it some more.

Let's take another look at the commandment as God gave it to Moses:

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)

Let me first remind you of what I said last week about this: If you look in the verses right before that, God says "you shall have no other gods before me," that word "before" is a word picture. It was a word that described someone carrying out adultery right in front of the other spouse – the ultimate humiliation.² So you can begin to get an idea of the strong emotion behind it when God uses the word, "jealousy." That's why over and over in the Old Testament...

- Idolatry = adultery.

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 Pokrifka, 217

Okay, but still, what does that mean that God is jealous? Jealousy isn't considered a positive thing, is it? Usually we think of jealousy as a petty thing; like a couple of junior high girls at summer camp that are after the same boy, or a high school boy who's upset that his girlfriend made eye contact with another boy.

It kind of sounds like God is insecure, doesn't it?

So why would God be jealous? He is jealous for your heart. It's because he loves you. "The reason why God has such a huge problem with idolatry is that his love for you is all-consuming. He loves you too much to share you."³

Paul Copan is a philosophy professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University, and he was considering God being jealous, so he explored the question, "When can jealousy be a good thing?" Describing God's deep passion for our wholehearted devotion, he wrote about how people are like the dog who drinks out of the toilet bowl and thinks to himself, "It doesn't get much better than this!" We *could* be enjoying the living water that only Jesus Christ can give us, but instead we choose substitutes that are so inferior that they are disgusting. God knows how good life could be for us with him, and he grieves when he sees us choosing an inferior existence. It makes him jealous in the most righteous and loving way. So Copan writes, "A wife who doesn't get jealous and angry when another woman is flirting with her husband isn't really committed to the marriage relationship...Outrage, pain, anguish – these are the appropriate responses to such deep violation. God isn't some abstract entity or impersonal principle...We should be amazed that the Creator of the universe would so deeply connect himself to human beings that he would open himself to sorrow and anguish in the face of human rejection and betrayal."⁴

So it makes sense then that the Bible says this about God:

"For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."
(Deuteronomy 4:24, niv)

In the Bible, the words "jealous" and "zealous" are pretty much interchangeable. It's the same Hebrew word in the original texts. Our English language spells them basically the same because they come from the same Greek word. Think about it: the word "zeal" means intense enthusiasm. That's exactly why God is so possessive about us: he is a consuming fire of passion for you and me.⁵

That's why in the Old Testament it compares idolatry to a cheating spouse. That's why in the New Testament, the Church is called the Bride of Christ. That's why there are several of Jesus' parables that talk about weddings or about a bride being faithful while she waits for her groom.

The pain of an unfaithful partner has to be one of the most agonizing experiences. I've seen it too many times when I'm doing marriage counseling and there's been

³ Idleman, 44

⁴ Ibid, 44-45

⁵ ibid

adultery. It's really the ultimate betrayal. And that is exactly how we are described when we reject the love of God for cheap substitutes. God is the betrayed lover.⁶

Years ago I was the pastor of a church near a military base, and I was counseling a couple who were dealing with the husband's adultery. He had been on a long term "TDY" – that stands for "temporary duty yonder." At that time, the difference between a TDY and a deployment was that a TDY could be up to 364 days, and a deployment was a year or longer (the government paid you less if you were on TDY). So this guy was on a longer term TDY and while he was gone, he had an affair with another woman. When he got home his wife found out. She had sensed it for a while, but when he got home, she found incriminating emails and messages. When she confronted him with it, he didn't get defensive or fight her about it, instead he said he had planned to tell her, because he thought it would be a good idea to keep both relationships at the same time. He didn't see a problem with having his wife and family here and then keeping up relations with the other woman whenever he was out of town.

You can imagine that his wife disagreed with that arrangement, and of course she would! She was hurt and angry and deeply betrayed. She was jealous – and well she should be!

This is how God sees you. He isn't happy to be one of many gods that you worship. He is very clear that we are to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. There is no cohabitation; there is no open marriage. God is a jealous God. He loves you too much not to be.

By the way, that couple I told you about? That was almost 30 years ago. We worked together a long time, and God worked in their hearts. The husband realized what he did and repented. He did the long, long work of earning back her trust and she did the long, long work of forgiving him and then trusting him. Last month they celebrated their 38th anniversary.

But the jealousy of God isn't just about how hurt he is when we choose differently; it's also shown in how he pursues us. He doesn't just let you run off with some other lover – he chases after you. God is in...

- **Hot pursuit** of you!

No matter what god is winning the war for your heart at any particular moment, you can be very sure of this: the one true God will not give you up without a fight. God is in hot pursuit of our wandering, adulterous hearts, and he'll pursue us to our graves. This is the God of the Bible. And this is one of the most unique things about Christianity.

When you think of every other world religion, no matter what it is – they are all about humans' attempts to reach up to God; to be good enough for God. You have to pray hard enough, obey long enough, meditate unendingly, carry out enough good

⁶ Ibid, 46

deeds, deny yourself enough times, pray certain times a day...on and on and on. Every world religion is our attempt to reach up for God. Only *Christianity is God reaching down for us*. One author says, "There is one God. He is all powerful. He takes an active role as father to every human being. His most striking feature is not anger or power or transcendence or even creativity but instead is his relentless, all-consuming love. No one would have just *made up* such a God. The idea is too outrageous.

This is a God who comes from heaven, from all his perfection and purity and power, to us, in all of our weakness and impurity, and puts on skin, taking the form of a helpless baby in pursuit of your heart... This is a God who has never given up on winning your heart. Never."⁷

So the entire Bible is a love letter to us, telling the narrative story from when he first lovingly created us. It is brutally honest about the depth of our betrayal of God, the ways we've insulted and rejected him, and yet he doubles down on his passionate pursuit of us. "This is a God who gives us freedom to say no but insists on giving us every possible, conceivable chance to say yes."⁸ All throughout the Bible, God offers us this special relationship with him and yet we kept rejecting him. So God finally takes the most shocking, amazing step of all to show his relentless pursuit of us: he sends his own Son. God puts everything on the line for us. He knew how it would turn out – that we would reject his love by torturing and killing his Son – and yet he still did it to show how far he's willing to go to win your heart. He made a choice between your life and the life of his one and only Son:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16, niv)

You can't understand how huge this issue of idolatry is if you don't understand the jealousy of God; a love that pursues you so deeply that he gives his very life for you. He is jealous for you, and not just for some of you or a part of you; he is jealous for your whole heart.

So with the Ten Commandments, God starts his relational covenant with his people by declaring that he must be first in our hearts and that he will not allow any cheap substitute in our lives. He even etched it into stone, so that Moses could take it down the mountain and show it to the people. Of course, Moses didn't even make it down the mountain before the people had already made a golden calf to worship. Let's just say God wasn't happy, and so Moses did some marriage mediation between God and the people. God relented (not without them paying the consequences, of course – there are always natural consequences for our choices). God forgave them and the people were back on course toward their honeymoon home in the Promised Land. It took them a generation to get there because they kept having affairs with other idols and sin along the way. They whined and they complained on the entire trip. Eventually, Moses died, and Joshua took over the lead. By the time we get to Joshua chapter 24, they are finally in the Promised Land,

⁷ Ibid, 49

⁸ Ibid

and Joshua is an old man. So let's fast forward from the giving of the commandment we've been talking about, to...

About 65 years later...

Joshua has been the general through a whole bunch of wars, fighting off hostile tribes that wanted to destroy the Israelites. He led as the walls of Jericho miraculously crashed to the ground. So by this time, Joshua knows he doesn't have much time left. He gets all the people of Israel together and gives them his farewell speech. He summarizes his speech by saying:

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness.

Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:14-15, niv)

Joshua makes it clear: it's time to choose. So he gives them a multiple-choice question: serve God, or the three other options. It's interesting that, even though Joshua is their leader and the army commander, he doesn't give an order. He knows that a choice needs to be made.

Years ago, I had on my staff an executive pastor who had come directly out of the military as a high-ranking officer. The hardest thing for him was the transition from military to the church. In the military it's very simple – you give the order and people obey. But in the church, you can't order people around. People don't obey you just because you said so. If they did, it would be a cult. Most of the time, if you try to order people in church to do something, they'll do the opposite just to show you can't order them!

Joshua understood this. Nobody can be ordered into the Kingdom of God. It's something that every person must choose – and it's an all or nothing choice. So Joshua laid it out for them by clarifying what their options were: the gods beyond the Euphrates, the gods of Egypt, the Gods of the Amorites, or the One True God.

Before we look at those options, it's important to understand something clearly: you *will* make a choice. Notice that when Joshua gave the options of the gods they could worship, notice that Joshua *did not* say, "or you could choose not to worship anything at all." All of us are worshippers; it is what we are hardwired to do. You see it in every culture, in every civilization. Everyone worships, no matter how primitive or advanced a people are.

We were created to be worshippers. Just like birds are created to fly and cheetahs are created to run, and rivers were created to flow, you were created to worship. It is what we do. The question is, who or what will be the object of our worship?

Think about advertising; they play right into our worshipping nature. One author says, “Companies make their products sound suspiciously like saviors. The not-so-subtle message of nearly every advertisement is: if you’re unhappy, bored, or depressed, then buy this product. You will be *saved* from your unhappiness, boredom, or depression. This product is here to redeem you, to deliver you. Talk to your doctor about this medication. Eat at this restaurant. Drive this car. Take this vacation. They even offer an invitation: dial this number. Visit this dealer. Order online today.”⁹ You almost expect them to ask you to bow your head and pray.

There are a lot of options and choices, but there is *no* option to opt out. Joshua is saying there is no choice that says, “none of the above.” Joshua says, “pick one.”

Let me say this, too: you might get hung up with this issue of idols because you might think that worship is about religion, that worship is about temples and wooden or metal sculptures and sacrificial systems. But it’s not. Worship is what’s built into us; it’s your reflex to put your hope in something or someone and then chase after it. So you shape your life around the pursuit of that thing. You organize your schedule; you discipline yourself so you can get it or achieve it. It becomes your way of thinking, the orientation of what you feel and what you do. Whether you realize it or not, you are worshipping. That’s what we do. It’s as natural to us as breathing eating and thinking.

So Joshua says: be clear about this: you will worship something. You will shape your entire life around something. Make your choice.

So let’s look at the options: first was the...

Gods beyond Euphrates (14a, 15a).

What were these? These gods go all the way back to the world that Abraham lived in. These gods are so old that the world was steeped in them. The point of this, for us, is that this would be the...

- Gods you grew up with.

These are the idols you inherited.

In many ways, we are products of our environments. This is why seemingly intelligent people can be racist – because they were born into it and never stop to consider that maybe it’s not right. Of course, it doesn’t have to be something as blatant as that. It could be that the family you grew up in prioritized the pursuit of money, either because they had a lot of it, or because there wasn’t any of it. So that drive for material security is an ingrained idol. An idol could be attitudes or achievements or acquirements that are positive or negative. But these are the gods you grew up with. You need to examine your life and identify the idols, and decide if

⁹ Ibid, 58

you are going to continue to worship those values and ideas and things.
Then Joshua tells them option two is the...

Gods of Egypt (14b).

For the Israelites, these were the gods they most recently lived with, gods of their recent past in Egypt. While they moved away from the land of these gods, the gods didn't necessarily move away from them. This is why they created a golden calf – that god was straight out of Egypt. Old habits, including old worship patterns, die hard.

For you and me, these are the...

- Gods of our past.

These are the residual idols of our choices, our sins, our habits, our addictions. These idols are particularly troublesome for Christians – especially those who got saved later in life. Old habits, old idols die hard. And the trouble is, we keep resurrecting them. We thought we put them to death, but they keep climbing out of the coffin and calling us to give them our attention and affection again. What idols of your past keep clinging to you?

Choice number three was the...

Gods of the Amorites (15b).

These were the people groups of the land that the Israelites had just fought so hard to conquer. These were the squatters in God's Promised Land. These weren't the gods they inherited, or the gods they were subjected to in Egypt; these were the gods they defeated. And even though they pushed them back and overcame them, these gods would continue to be a thorn in their side for the rest of the Israelite story. The weapons of these gods was their proximity; these were the gods who hid in plain sight.

The Israelites lived in a place like we do – there was a great deal of diversity. There were many groups with many gods. One writer says, "The dominant deity was Baal, whose name meant 'owner, master, lord.' ... Baal started his career as the god of weather, but expanded into fertility and, from there, to such things as ritual prostitution. There was also a mother goddess, Ashtoreth. The sacrifices, the temples, the sexual rituals – these things enticed the Israelites, and the prophets of the Old Testament despised these above all other gods. Why? Because these gods had the home field advantage. They were right there."¹⁰

Obviously, these are for us the...

¹⁰ Ibid, 65

- **Gods of the present.**

These are the gods we're steeped in. These are the idols we are surrounded by. These are the idols in whose waters we swim. It could be narcissism or hedonism or nationalism or countless other things today. But it's invisible to us because it's all around us. It would be wise for us to open our eyes and pay attention to the idols all around us – idols we've adopted without even thinking about it.

That's why we're doing this series. Because we are called to worship...

God Himself (15c).

God isn't just another option; He's really been the only option all along. The other options aren't even real. That's why it's so tragic that we worship them because they are empty and lifeless. That's why God so jealously pursues us, because he knows at the end of the idol worship road is our destruction. *He* is the only viable, real, worship choice.

Right before Joshua gives them these choices, he lists some of the highlights of the things God has done for them. He's setting up his point: when you think about it, really, what have these other gods really done for you? These idols you pursue; how have they fulfilled you?

Tom Brady was asked which Super Bowl ring was his favorite. Do you know what his answer was? He said, my favorite Super Bowl ring is the next one. Basically he said with sadness, "I spend my life pursuing this, but it never gives me the satisfaction I desire." It's why Michael Jordan said after he retired, "How can I enjoy the next 20 years without so much of this consuming me? How can I find peace away from the game of basketball?"¹¹ These guys were at the height of success; the highest in their sports, the GOATS of their games. And they still aren't satisfied. It's true for you and me, too. Everything else besides God that we give our lives to will ultimately leave us empty. We are wired to worship, but the only worship that works is with the one true God, and we've got to work hard to subdue or slay all other idols around us every day.

Joshua's story ends as a cautionary tale. It comes only two Bible chapters after the one we just read. Listen to what it says in Judges 2:8-10 (it's not on the screen because I want you to listen carefully):

"Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. They buried him in the land he had been allocated...After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel." (Judges 2:8-10, nlt)

That's how quickly they chose to worshipped idols.

¹¹ Wright Thomson, "Michael Jordan Has Left the Building," ESPN Magazine (2-22-13)

This is the choice we have. Don't be fooled. You are a worshipper whether you want to be or not. What are you worshiping? Take a good hard look. Some gods you've grown up with. Some gods keep popping up from your own past choices. Many, many idols are all around you, infecting your worship every day. Choose this day – today – whom you will serve. God has been patiently, passionately, jealously pursuing you to the point of his one and only Son who gave himself for you. Who. Will. You. Serve.?

Choose the others and it will never be enough.

Choose God. Remember, "This is a God who gives us freedom to say no but insists on giving us every possible, conceivable chance to say yes."¹²

Say yes to him. Either subdue or slay the others.

But here's the cool thing about choosing God through Christ: he gives you his Holy Spirit to help you stay true to him! He comes alongside, moves in, and strengthens, encourages, transforms, equips, directs...on and on. And with him comes complete joy, peace, hope, and love.

Prayer

Benediction:

"Jesus Christ ... faithfully reveals all truth to us. He was the first to rise from death, to die no more. He is far greater than any king in all the earth. All praise to him who always loves us and who set us free from our sins by pouring out his lifeblood for us. He has gathered us into his Kingdom and made us priests of God his Father. Give to him everlasting glory! He rules forever! Amen!" (Revelation 1:5-6, tlb)

¹² ibid