

Idols of the Heart

Introduction – Part 3

Idols of self.

- *Exodus 20:4-5a*

Self-worship.

- *Proverbs 27:2; Isaiah 2:11-12; Matthew 23:12; 2 Timothy 3:1-5*

Identity of self.

(Idolatry)

- *Genesis 1:27*

Image of God.

- *2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:10; Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:27*

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Idols of the Heart: Relation to self: Idol of Identity¹

Today we are in the third part of our summer series called “Idols of the Heart.” In the Bible, idolatry is the number one issue, making its way into every book. Of course today we don’t worship wooden images – our idols are more sophisticated – but just as deadly as they were in the Old Testament. Ultimately, idolatry is an issue of Lordship – who or what is Lord of our lives? Something will be, and we must decide. So we need to be brutally honest with ourselves and identify the idols of the heart. The last two Sundays we looked at why idol worship is such a big issue, and if you weren’t with us, I really encourage you to go back and watch them or download the manuscripts from our website and get caught up with us.

From here on we are going to begin looking at some of the predominant idols that we struggle with that really fall into three categories: idols in relation to the self, idols in relation to people, and idols in relation to the world around us. We’ll explore each of those categories over a couple Sundays, so today we are beginning with the...

Idols of self.

This tendency to worship ourselves is evident in the first of the Ten Commandments, that we’ve already talked about, but let me read it just to make sure we are all clear. It’s in Exodus 20:

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.

“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 20:1-5a, niv)

I want you to notice something: We are told we are not to worship an image of anything found where? (Look at the verse...) “In heaven above, the earth beneath, or the waters below”. I think it’s safe to assume that means anything in all of creation – whether in heaven or earth, right? And who made all that? God did. So to

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

worship anything other than God is to worship something he already created. Every idol of antiquity was made to look like people or animals or some combination of the two. Cultures would take the strong traits of those animals or mythical people and make them into a god they could worship.

We do that today, too. We don't actually carve out statues, but we do worship what God has created, and one of the main creations of God that we worship is ... ourselves. We are self-worshippers.

It all started within days of our being created. Do you remember the story? It's recorded in Genesis 3. God creates everything, and then, finally, he makes a man and a woman. They are the pinnacle of his creative order. It is only to the humans that God gives his very own image. They have free reign of creation – they get to manage it and create things with it. In the center of this beautiful garden are two trees – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit of one tree allows them to live forever. The fruit of the other tree gives them insight into the heavenlies – stuff that is too heavy for them to bear. So God warns them not to eat from that tree. By doing so God, in his profound wisdom and love, gives them a choice to love him back – or not. But they are no sooner created then the serpent comes along and deceives them. He tells them that God is lying to them; he says God doesn't want them to eat from that tree because if they do, they will become gods themselves. They like that idea, so they disobey God and eat from it. And they find out that God was right all along. They are banished from the Garden, no longer able to eat from the tree of life, so death enters their world. Sin enters their hearts, and it is passed along to every human being. It is in our DNA to this very day. And what is that sin? *The desire to be God.*

You and I were created in the image of God: we have the capacity to know him and be in relationship with him and cocreate with him. He entrusted us to manage his creation, to explore it all and to grow and advance things. But that in no way means that we *were* him. We could be godly, but never *godlike*.

The original sin is this desire within us to be god – to worship ourselves as the captain of our destiny, the master of our fate. We want to be in charge, to call the shots, and we will not submit to anyone who tells us otherwise.

Do me a favor: in your head spell the word “sin.” S. I. N. What is the middle letter? I. What is the middle of sin? I. I am the center of sin. Sin is selfishness. That's why in our explorations of the idols we worship; we are starting with this one because it is the center of all idol worship...

Self-worship.

The issue of self-worship is why we are warned time again about pride – because what is pride except self-worship? The writer of Proverbs warned:

“Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips.” (Proverbs 27:2, niv)

The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote about the time of God's judgement at the end of times, and he said this specifically:

"The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled)." (Isaiah 2:11-12, niv)

There are over fifty verses in the Bible warning us against pride. The New Testament is included in that, only it gets even more specific.

Jesus warned us about this many times, including when he clearly said:

"For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:12, niv)

Paul wrote to Timothy in his second letter about the results of the sin of self-worship:

"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves (*note that this sin comes first in the list of all the others! All the others come from this!*), lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people." (2 Timothy 3:1-5, niv)

You might see that and think he's talking about the last days in the future, but they believed they were in the last days because *this is what they were seeing all around them*. In fact, the very next verse says, "These are the kinds of people who worm their way into peoples' homes..." So clearly, he's referring to something that was going on at that time – something that is still going on today; we are still in the last days! People are lovers of themselves.

All that points to one of the main ways we see the idol of self being worshiped today, and that is in the issue of...

Identity of self.

It is human nature to look for our identity in all kinds of things, and it comes from our need to find a sense of self and a sense of belonging. This may be our number one human drive after the drive for survival. And, since many of us in our country have the need for survival resolved, the sense of identity has become number one. But just because it is human nature, don't think that how we go about it is right. You might say, "Seeking our identity is only natural." *Our sin nature is natural*. Our sin nature and our need for identity combine to equal self-worship. Remember I said last week that worship is what we are hardwired to do, but worship is not about religion; worship means that thing or things that we put our trust and our hope in.

“I” is the center of sin, and so I is the biggest idol in our lives. Therefore, “I”-dentity is where we direct that worship.

We can create our identity in our careers, in our accomplishments, in our spouse or family or other relationships, in our material possessions, in our social standing – really in just about anything. And not all those things are bad things, but here's the problem with all of them: when we create our identity in any of those things, it means we have fashioned an idol of ourselves that looks like whatever those things are.

Let me show what I mean: the Israelites made a golden calf; it was created after the Egyptian/Canaanite bull god el/baal. The statue represented that false god. For us, whatever we've created our identity in – say it's our career, if I identify as a brilliant accountant, and I am filled with pride at my accounting accomplishments, then an accountant is the idol that represents *me* – *the false god of me*. We do that with anything. I'm family man. I'm a wife. I'm a mother. I'm a musician. I'm an athlete. I'm a teacher. I'm a lawyer. I'm a perfectionist. Any of those things can be idols of the self if they are our identity.

Is this making sense? Being an accountant is a great thing – until it is where I create my identity. We've created a way to worship ourselves in our identity. So let me make up a word for this...

Identolatry.

Psychologists tell us that narcissism² has reached epidemic levels today. The text book, clinical definition of a narcissist is a person who pathologically only thinks about themselves. They are incapable of thinking about someone else (unless the other person can help the narcissist focus on himself). That's one definition of narcissism. It's NPD – narcissistic personality disorder. But all of us have narcissistic tendencies, and that is our natural tendency because that is our broken, sin nature – remember? I is in the middle of sin. This can be because we are too full of pride, or because we are too insecure. Either way, we are trying to create an identity of ourselves. but the amount of people with those tendencies is increasing significantly more than ever before, and what we're seeing today is very concerning. It is showing up especially in our younger generations, from about college-age and younger. I want to talk about what they are facing for a minute, because that is when the search for identity is most intense. If you are in the younger generations, I'm not picking on you. I'm picking on us! Because too many of us spend too much time judging you and not loving you and trying to understand you. So I'm going to talk about you for a minute to those of us who are older.

The tendency toward narcissism in younger people is not on the NPD side of the spectrum but the identity side. This trend toward narcissism is increased when there is trauma involved, because they are hurting so much, they are more desperate. It's not because of pride but because of insecurity. They are facing

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/202402/why-narcissism-is-rising>

enormous pressure today that is different than you and I have ever had to experience. Part of it is because they've watched the identities us older generation folks have created, and they reject those – they've seen and felt how destructive they can be. This rise in narcissism is hitting them especially hard because some have experienced trauma from adults or institutions or the even the church, but all of them experienced trauma during Covid. The time they were forming social connections was cut off for long periods of time and traumatized all of them educationally, developmentally, and personally.

Psychologists tell us that this is showing up as younger people are experiencing higher self-esteem and are more concerned with what others think of them.

One article in Psychology Today says, "Narcissists tend to be fragile, so (the rise in) narcissism helps explain why young people suffer from unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicidal thinking. Young women are particularly vulnerable here because the internet exaggerates insecurity over their personal appearance."³

Psychiatrists say that one contributor for this rise in narcissism is because we've made accomplishments easier; out of our own insecurity as parents we've tried to shield them from pain by making them winners all the time. Getting trophies for everything hasn't helped. Then, education has been a big contributor because we too often prioritized graduation over grades. But by far, the culprit has been social media.

The rise of the selfie has moved us from behind the camera to in front of it. If someone visits the Eiffel Tower, or the Grand Canyon – those are stunningly beautiful things to see. But now our pictures show those things over our shoulder with our own faces taking up 2/3 of the image. The self takes center stage.

The other problem with this is, when these pictures are posted online, it creates a sense of envy in others, and portrays the person as having a glamorous lifestyle – which is exactly what "influencers" accomplish and why they are now celebrity millionaires (another form of idol worship). So it creates what's called "FOMO" – fear of missing out. So we begin to feel inferior because our selfies aren't as exotic as that person's. The article says, "social media encourages people to inflate their self-image...in other words (it) encourages people to behave like individuals with narcissistic personality disorder."⁴

As all of that was rising, along came the pandemic, and social media becomes one of our only means of social interaction and reinforcement, especially for young people. This happened at the exact same time that social media companies were well aware of what they were doing to our young people: doing everything to hook them and addict them. The more insecure young people felt, the more they went online. The more they went online, the more money Facebook and Insta and TikTok made. And the more insecure and narcissistic our young people became. It became a perfect storm that our younger generations were right in the middle of.

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

So we have the rise of what psychiatrists call “social contagion.” For example, statistically, Tourette’s Syndrome is rare, and is mostly found in boys. But a large percentage of boys and girls outgrow it – until social media came along. A few young girls who struggle with Tourette’s began posting videos of themselves and their symptoms online and quickly became social media influencers. Their symptoms, conveniently, became more severe as their views went up. I’m not saying they were faking it – I can’t make that judgement. But they made money from it. Suddenly there was a pandemic of teenage and young adult girls getting Tourette’s. These girls may think they have it, but psychiatrists quickly identified it as social contagion. It became a creation of their identity. All thanks to social media and the pandemic.

Guess what else has increased exponentially, at the exact same time? Issues of gender dysphoria – gender identity and fluidity. Except with this, no one is allowed to call it social contagion. Instead, media and society are demanding we embrace and affirm it, and insist the ultimate solution is to perform life altering medical procedures on children.

Now I know this is a very, very complex issue. But at the very least, anytime that large corporations stand to make large amounts of money off of our kids’ struggles, we should naturally be suspicious of their so-called solutions. There are many, many factors at play on this issue that we don’t have really *any* time to begin unpacking. But between the rise of narcissism, social media, the pandemic, and societal pressure as it is, is it any wonder at all that our young people are hurting and anxious and creating these identities?

So we have people today identifying as all kinds of things. And all of that is flawed – all of it. Here’s why: because its roots are in idolatry. Whenever we create an identity – no matter what it is – we are in trouble. This is not a younger generation issue; we all do it. But they are being crushed by the pressure of it.

Now please listen to me: I’m not casting judgement on anyone. None of us ever should. Never.

I’m just saying this: If your identity is based on anything other than Christ, you are missing it altogether and headed for trouble. It’s a dead end. So if you identify as a certain gender or sexual orientation, or if you identify as an accountant or teacher – you are placing your worship in the wrong place. You are committing idolatry.

Remember when I was talking about what happened at creation? I mentioned something that’s worth revisiting by looking at the actual verse. It says this:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27, niv)

Whose image are we created in? God’s image. *Not* our own image. Not our identity creations.

The solution here folks is not identity or idolatry; the solution is *whose image we are*. We are made in the...

Image of God.

All this is not an identity issue; it is an image issue. Theologians call this the “*imago Dei*.” You and I were created to be in the image of God. Again, I could preach a long time about what it means to be in the image of God, but it essentially means that *humans – unlike any other creature in all of creation – humans possess the unique capacity to reflect God’s nature and character.* (repeat)

We were created to reflect God’s nature and character. And what is that nature and character? Love. Love is what drives everything God does. He is all wisdom, he is all powerful, he is just and true and holy and righteous and compassionate and giving. He gets angry and he also judges. But he does all those things and more out of love for us. And we are made in his image – to reflect all those things that he is, created to have access to all of those things he does, but *in all things, to love*. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, that image was turned inward to identity, and became evident in our shame, in our jealousy, in our greed. Sin. And we manifested it in our idol worship.

This, my friends, is the reason Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, came to us, taught us, demonstrated it to us, suffered and died and rose again for us. It was so that we could be restored to the image of God. *To put our faith in Jesus means to be saved from our idolatry and restored to the image of God.*

The biggest idol of all is ourselves. And the only way we can be delivered from it is in Christ.

This is what the New Testament is all about. Listen to just a few of these verses – the references on the screen and in your notes so listen to how they are talking about the image of God being restored for you:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Galatians 2:20

1 Peter 2:9

Ephesians 2:10

Romans 8:17

Galatians 3:27

2 Corinthians 5:17 – Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

1 Peter 2: 9 – But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Ephesians 2:10 – For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Galatians 3:27 – for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (niv)

Over and over again, all through the New Testament, is the story and the description of being restored to the image of God. You cannot read the Bible without seeing the story of God loving us. God loving us in creation, God loving us in our struggles against him in the Old Testament, God loving us is his ultimate solution in Christ and what that life now looks like, which is holiness – not to mention what the future of that life in eternity looks like. *That* is the Bible.

My friend, if you are placing your identity in *anything* other than Christ, you have created an idol of yourself. Find your identity in Christ and you will begin to be restored to the image of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and everything else will begin to fall into place. You will subdue some idols, and you will have to slay others. The good things will get back into place and the sinful things will need to go away. I'm not saying it will be easy, but it will be right, and it will be worth it. Every other identity other than in Christ is settling for the satanic substitute of a lesser life.

Prayer

If you want or need help with this, that's what we're here for. We won't judge you or reject you; we will journey with you and do everything we can to help *you* put Christ first in your life. We can't do it for you, and we won't try. You must do it. We'll do all we can to help you. We will continue to not judge you and to love you while you do it.

Benediction:

(May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith...that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19, niv)