

Idols of the Heart: Week 2

Healing Idolatry with the Gospel

Truth

In the previous lesson we looked at “What is an Idol?” and “Identifying Idols of our Heart.” But we must do more than name the idols of our heart. This will only lead to despair. Rather, we need to dismantle and replace the idols with the gospel, if we are to experience healing.

“The way forward, out of despair, is to discern the idols of our hearts and our culture. But that will not be enough. The only way to free ourselves from the destructive influence of counterfeit gods is to turn back to the true one. The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the Cross, the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you, and, if you fail him, can truly forgive you” (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xxiv).

“Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God, it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God. This cannot be remedied only by repenting that you have an idol, or using willpower to try to live differently. Turning from idols is not less than those two things, but it is far more. ‘Setting the mind and heart on things above’ where ‘your life is hidden with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:1-3) means appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you. It entails joyful worship, a sense of God’s reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol” (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 172).

There are three basic approaches to dealing with idolatry that Christians often employ. These materials are adapted from *Romans: A Study Course in the Gospel* by Tim Keller.

1. The “Moralizing” Approach

Basic analysis: Your problem is that you are doing wrong. Repent!

This focuses on behavior--but doesn't go deep enough. We must find out the why of our behavior. Why do I find I want to do the wrong things? What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) to 'repent and change behavior' is insufficient, because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, 'even if you live up to moral standards, but you don't have this, then you are still a failure.' You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all--your particular idolatry.

2. The “Psychologizing” Approach

Basic analysis: Your problem is that you don't see that God loves you as you are. Rejoice!

This focuses on feelings, which seems to be “deeper” than behavior--but it also fails to go deep enough. We must also find out the why of our feelings. Why do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens? What are the inordinate desires that are being frustrated? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) 'God loves you--rejoice!' is insufficient, because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, 'even if God loves you, but you don't have this, then you are still a failure.' You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all--your particular idolatry.

3. The “Gospel” Approach

Basic Analysis: Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice!

This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to idols. Every idol-system is a way of our-works-salvation, and thus it keeps us "under the law". Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law--when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation. Only when we realize in a new way that we are righteous in Christ is the idol's power over us broken. Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace. (Rom.6:14) You will only be “under grace” and free from the controlling effects of idols to the degree that you have both: (1) repented for your idols, and (2) rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

Dismantling Idols: (Judges 10:10-16; Rom.8:13)

Repent of your Idols of the Heart

On the one hand, (contra the Psychologizing Approach) you are called to repent. You have been worshipping an idol and rejected the true God. Every idol is the center of some system of works-righteousness by which we are seeking to "earn" our salvation, so you are also trying to be your own Savior. So you must repent. But this actually gives much hope--it means there is something you can do. The Psychologizing Approach, though sympathetic, is not truly empowering, because it leaves us feeling like helpless victims.

Unmask the Idols (destroying their attraction)

Seeing how weak and poor they are (in themselves). Idols create "delusions". They appear more wonderful or all powerful than they really are. Stand back and get them into perspective. Look at them, now, very specifically, and in prayer,

confess that these things are good, but finite and weak, and praise God for being the only source of what you need.

Seeing 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.

Seeing 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) that 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."

Replacing Idols: Rejoice! (Luke 10:20; Col.3:1-4)

On the other hand, (contra the Moralizing Approach) you are called to tremendous joy and encouragement. What you have turned from is the beauty, love, and joy of Christ. He offers what you have been seeking elsewhere. He awaits you, he "stands at the door" knocking (Rev.3:20), seeking a far deeper connection of intimacy with you than he has had previously. This deeper intimacy with God flows from an appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you.

"Rejoicing" in the Bible 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 feel happy", since he also said that every day he was weighted with concern and anxiety over his flock (2 Cor.11:28-29). Jesus forbade 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 that it needs. The rejoicing is thus not strictly a second distinct step after repentance, but rather it completes the repentance.

The Moralizing Approach, then, though challenging, is not in the end truly cleansing, because it only makes us afraid of the consequences of our sin, rather than disgusted with the sin itself as grieving and dishonoring to our Savior. Thus, it is only as we rejoice in the absolute certainty of his love for us that we can truly repent. In the gospel, it is the thing that most assures us (free grace) that most deeply convicts us of sin.

How can we rejoice like this?

1. Rejoice in Principle

Right here and now, you can deliberately in prayer, thank God for his salvation in Christ as a replacement for the self-salvation of idolatry in general.

2. Rejoice in Particular

To replace idols so they cannot grow (back), you must learn to rejoice in the particular thing that Jesus brings or his particular asset that replaces the particular idol of your heart. Here are some examples:

When “anxious” because of idolatry (out of a desire for control), let Jesus comfort you with his care. Meditate on Matthew 6:25-34 and Philippians 4:4-9.

When “hard, cold, or angry” because of idolatry (out of a desire for power), let Jesus humble and soften you with his mercy. Meditate on Psalm 145:8 and Matthew 18:21-35.

When feeling “hurt and rejected” because of idolatry (out of a desire for approval), let Jesus assure you of his love. Meditate on Romans 8:1; Colossians 1:22 and 1 John 3:1.

3. Rejoice in Process

Rejoicing in Christ as a replacement for idols is a process. The first time you do it, there will be some relief and change, but it takes a long time for the fundamental “affections” of our heart to be drawn away from our idols toward Christ.

Essentially, rejoicing in Christ is worship. You can get no relief simply by “figuring out” your idols and simply 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 “Rejoicing in Particular” exercises 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). And remember the promise that Paul states in Philippians 1:6, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Equipping

Healing Idolatry with the Gospel

Name the Idols (getting specific)

Below, list your main idols, as you understand them now. Refer to Lesson One-*Identifying Idols of the Heart* exercise (pages 3-4). Revise and add to this any new insights that may have come to you while doing the reading of this project.

Review lesson one and list the three idols of the heart you identified. Go through the application steps with each one.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How can the three idols of the heart enslave and destroy you if they are not dismantled?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

In prayer, admit how deeply you have grieved and de-valued Jesus, and ask forgiveness.

Complete the following steps for the three idols of your heart you have identified.

1. Name the Idol: _____

Unmask the Idol: _____

Rejoice in particular: _____

Replace in particular: _____

2. Name the Idol: _____

Unmask the Idol: _____

Rejoice in particular: _____

Replace in particular: _____

3. Name the Idol: _____

Unmask the Idol: _____

Rejoice in particular: _____

Replace in particular: _____

Accountability

Share your top three idols of the heart with the group and explain how you will unmask them and replace them with the gospel.

Mission

Share briefly an update on how the relationship is going with the three people on your prayer tags.

What would the next step in one of these relationships look like? Each of you help brainstorm ways to further the relationship or take steps towards sharing the gospel.

How can sharing your *idols of the heart* with those outside the church, and exploring *idols of their heart*, open up a door for the gospel of grace?

Supplication

“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18).

Share your prayer requests with one another. Space is below to write them down. Use this to help remind you what to pray for each other during the week.

What are your prayer requests regarding the truth this week?

In light of the discussion this week what do you need to pray for?

What are your prayer requests regarding any situations in your life this week?

Prayer requests from others in the group this week.