

Idolatry: False Worship

In the last verse of his first epistle, the Apostle John admonishes his readers to “keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn 5:21). Why is that particular command so important for us to heed and be reminded of frequently? It is because each of us, from our mother’s womb, is an expert in inventing idols. The premier theologian, John Calvin, insightfully diagnosed that the human heart is a factory of idols. We want something and want it too much!

The heart is an interesting place. It is where all the issues of life come from, so whatever is present in reality and in experience also occurs here. Man is a dual being: body and soul, material and immaterial. The heart is the multi-orbed composition of thoughts, will (i.e., choice), conscience, motives, and desires. This is the part of man that must be tended to and guarded, knowing that from it flow the issues of life (Prov 4:23). Its natural bent since the Fall of man into sin is only evil (Gen 6:5). It is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). Without the transforming power of the Gospel and the influence of Christ, the heart produces bad fruit; but when captivated by His glory, it produces good fruit (Matt 22:34-40; Mk 7:20-23).

The heart was created for worship—worship of the only worthy One (Rev 4:9-11; 5:11-14). At the core of our beings, we are worshippers. However, instead of worshipping our Creator, man tends to worship power, people, protection, physical health, possessions, popularity, peace, play, and prestige.

What are you worshipping? In other words, what do you serve, sacrifice for, focus on, submit to, hope in, serve, give to, or speak about? Where are you spending your time, energy, and money? We need to learn from Jesus that where we place our treasure and what we value indicate what our heart is worshipping (Matt 6:21).

Be reminded by the Psalmist of the vanity of every idol that we raise up in the place of our trustworthy God (Ps 115). The heart is a very religious place. It is a temple in which we either enthrone self or in which we are constantly re-orienting around that fact that “for me to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21; cf. 2 Cor 5:15).

Stuart Scott, in his outstanding book, *The Exemplary Husband*, defines an idol as “anything we consistently make equal to or more important than God in our attention, desire, devotion, and choices.”¹ Furthermore, John MacArthur writes in his expositional commentary: “Idolatry includes much more than bowing down or burning incense to a physical image. Idolatry is having any false god—any object, idea, philosophy, habit, occupation, sport, or whatever that has one’s primary concern and loyalty or that to any degree decreases one’s trust in and loyalty to the Lord.”² We can all confess to the all-too-frequent times of bowing down in allegiance to many things apart from Christ. We are to confess our guilt-worthiness, repent, and turn, asking the empowering Holy Spirit to help us remain loyal only to Christ,

¹ Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective* Revised Edition (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, Inc., 2002), 91.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), 232-233.

and to deny any competing allegiances. An essential part of that repentance is to unpack what idolatry looks like, that we might flee any vestiges of it in our lives.

In order to put the spotlight on any competing allegiances, it would be helpful to ask some x-ray questions of our heart:

- What are my goals, expectations, or intentions?
- What do I become anxious or fearful over?
- What makes me happy?
- What motivates me?
- What would I like, (possibly more than anything)?
- In what situations do I respond in anger?
- What perceived right(s) has been denied?
- What biblical standard or principle permits that thought, word, or action?

Bob Summerville, professor of counseling, offers some helpful questions in his helpful book on depression:³

- What do you think you must have in order for your life to have meaning again?
- Are you making a place in your heart for what you know to be sin in the Lord's eyes?
- Have you sought worldly success at the expense of everything else?
- Do you seek the approval of people more than approval from God?
- Have you neglected the spiritual leadership of your family?
- Have your disappointments, busy lifestyle or other issues led to sin in the area of not caring for your body, the temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Are you filled with anger and bitterness, and are you unwilling to forgive someone?
- Are there other sins that came out of these idolatries of the heart such as dishonesty, slander, use of pornography, adultery, unbiblical divorce, or even murder as in the case of David?

Is there any deficiency in your passion for God? I think an honest answer would typically be "yes". Study the passionate desire that biblical writers had for God, as seen in such passages as Ps 42:1-2; 86:11-12; 119:2, 10, 46, 69; Matt 6:33-34; 2 Cor 5:9; Phil 3:10.

Furthermore, study God's character to examine how your view of God may be skewed. Consider the character and attributes of God that are directly involved in the areas that your heart needs re-orienting.

³ Robert B. Summerville, *If I Am a Christian, Why Am I Depressed? Finding meaning and Hope in the Dark Valley, One Man's Journey* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014), 104.

Pray for God to reveal to you anything that you are treasuring more than Christ and solicit the help of the Holy Spirit to enable you to change, for the glory and preeminence of Christ.

Further Resources:

Coming Face to Face With His Majesty by John MacArthur

The Thought of God by Maurice Roberts

Knowing God by J.I. Packer

The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer

The Attributes of God by Arthur W. Pink

The Holiness of God by R.C. Sproul

Also noteworthy is Chapter 7 of *The Exemplary Husband*, which deals extensively with this subject.

CCEF's website also has an extended article by Powlison titled, "*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair.*"⁴

Soli Deo Gloria,

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⁴ David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and "Vanity Fair," CCEF (October 16, 2009), under "Idolatry (General)," <http://www.ccef.org/idols-heart-and-vanity-fair> (accessed January 14, 2015).