

# The Problem with Idols of the Heart

**T**he essential dynamic of change in the heart of the Christian runs on a cycle of repentance and faith. Repentance is unmasking the idols of the heart; that is, the motivations for action from an identity other than Christ, and then taking them to the Cross. Faith is trusting in the forgiveness of Christ and understanding both the depth of our sin and the worth of Christ’s sacrifice.

“All of life is repentance.” Martin Luther (Thesis #1 of the 95 Theses nailed to the door of the Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany)

## Day One: Removing Idols from the Heart

*or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

### Listen to “Removing Idols from the Heart” by Tim Keller

(Go to the Living FDFD website, Week Four, to watch this sermon.)

### Meditate:

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### Scripture:

**Colossians 3:5-11** | *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Gentile*

### Conviction:

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### Connect:

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## Day Two: Understanding Idols

**W**hen God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, top on his list of “DON'Ts” was...

*“You shall have no other gods before me.”* Naturally, we want to know what God meant by “other gods” (Exodus 20:3). He goes on to tell us in verses 4-5.

*“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. 5 **You shall not bow down to them or worship them...***

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An IDOL is anything that is more important to you than God. It is anything that captures the affections of your heart that should be invested in a relationship with God. It is anything that you hope will give you what only God can give.

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Those words highlighted in verse five make it clear that anything that takes the place of God as ULTIMATE, as the object of our PRIMARY allegiance, or as a counterfeit god, can be an idol. Unfortunately, it is the good things in life—like marriage, money, sex, children, and success—that are the prime candidates for idol status. In fact, the greater the good, the more likely we are to expect these “idols”

to satisfy our deepest longings, needs, and hopes. So anything can serve as an idol or counterfeit god, especially the best things in life.

Question: What is an IDOL?

Answer: An IDOL is anything that is more important to you than God. It is anything that captures the affections of your heart that should be invested in a relationship with God. It is anything that you hope will give you what only God can give. An idol is something that is so essential to your life that if you were to lose it (lose money, lose a child, lose a job) that life would no longer be worth living. An idol is something other than God that you look to in order to give your life meaning and purpose. It is whatever you have substituted for God to gain significance and security.

Now we can understand why God said to Moses as a follow-up to the command to 1) worship Him supremely, and, 2) worship no other gods / idols. And what motivates these commands is His “jealousy.” In Exodus 20:5, He tells us, *“for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”* An understanding of what He meant by this will give us a clue as to why God is so intent on us keeping these first two commands.

God is not “jealous” like we are. He doesn’t grind over us having something he doesn’t. His jealousy is the same kind of jealousy we have for the affections and trust of our children. We want them to trust us, not the drug dealer hanging out at school. We want our daughter to trust us, not the sweet talking guy who is three years older than her at school. We know we have our children’s best interest at heart and we know that those other voices and influences in their lives do not. Maybe a better translation of the word is “zealous” in that God is intent on providing guidance so that He is glorified and we are satisfied. Therefore, the commands of God are

a gift to us since worshipping other gods will only result in our experiencing less freedom, less satisfaction, and less of whatever it is that we truly long for.

What are some examples of “idols” that are commonly pursued as an alternative to the pursuit of God? What makes each of these idols attractive is the fact that they promise us “relief” or “rescue” from a life of fear and insecurity?

Let’s take money for instance. It promises to make you SOMEBODY... that you will finally be able to fit into the “club” of people who are thought to be smart and ambitious. It promises that if you have enough you will never fear what the world can do to you. Therefore, it promises insulation from tough times and circumstantial insecurity.

What about success or popularity? These things promise some of the same things as the idol of money. Instead of seeking God, we prefer these counterfeit gods, we will invest heavily in gaining the very short lived approval of others. In these pursuits we will find out that we are only as “popular” or “successful” as our last accomplishment. Again, this is why a life of flourishing is so elusive for the person who chooses to bow down and worship an idol instead of God? Instead of curing our fear and insecurities, it adds to them.

## **Scripture:**

**Exodus 20:3-5** | *You shall have no other gods before me. 4 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. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...*

## **Meditate:**

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## **Conviction:**

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## **Connect:**

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## Day Three: Why We Are So Enticed by Idols of the Heart?

**A**s you might recall, Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden against God's authority; that is, His right to tell them what to do—what is right and what is wrong. We call this God's Moral Authority. The immediate consequence of this rebellion was a break in the relationship between them and God. They had violated God's TRUST. Now, in a sense, they were on their own, deciding for themselves what would make them happy and fulfilled.

Immediately both of them experienced something they had

never experienced before: fear, insecurity, and guilt. They were "naked"—not just physically, but emotionally as well. Since then, all of mankind has struggled with the consequences of possessing a sin nature. We are SELF-CONSCIOUS, SELF-ABSORBED, SELF-CENTERED, and just plain SELFISH. Because all of us share in this sin nature we all naturally think we know what is best for us, what will fulfill us, and our first inclination is never the idea that God will fulfill and satisfy our deepest

longings. So we naturally look to IDOLS—things like MONEY, SEX and POWER/CONTROL.

The problem is not that money, sex, and power are bad things. The problem is with us—that we OVER-DESIRE these things. There is a Greek word that is consistently used to identify our PROBLEM. It is the word *epithumia*. It means to "over-desire" something that is good. Look at how the Apostle Paul uses this word over and over to describe our natural tendency to long for IDOLS of the HEART to give us what only God can give.

*"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Rom. 13:14).*

*"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16).*

*"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal. 5:24).*

*"All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath." (Eph. 2:3).*

*"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires" (Ephesians 4:22).*

We NATURALLY desire that which we think will help us conquer our FEARS and INSECURITIES. That is at the heart of why we pursue counterfeit gods and false "saviors." As sinners in need of a savior, we are attracted to "deceitful desires" (Eph. 4:22). When we "over-desire" other things rather than God, we are hoping that we can overcome our fears and insecurities without bending the knee to God. That is a form of "self-salvation." Unfortunately, the result of this pursuit is disillusionment, more fears, more

**NOTE** | the word "flesh" (same with old self, old man, or natural man/self) is simply a reference to our SINFUL NATURE that we inherited from Adam and Eve. Because of this, all of us experience a gravitational pull toward rebellion against God's authority in our life. We naturally resist GLORIFYING HIM and THANKING HIM (Romans 1:21 *"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."*)

insecurity, and a life plagued with true moral guilt.

What IDOL of the heart do you tend to over-desire? Why do you think that is? What does it falsely promise to give you that only God can give?

**Scripture:**

**1 John 5:21** | *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

**Meditate:**

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**Conviction:**

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**Connect:**

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# Day Four: Why Secular Salvation Always Ends in Frustration

**The Secular Story of Salvation:**

**Creation** didn't happen. The cosmos is a happy accident. We are not accountable to any one or anything beyond ourselves. Life meaning and purpose come from within, not from some other entity. Every person is free to choose their own path because their bodies belong to them.

**The Garden** represents our Inner Child and a time when we were innocent, happy, fulfilled, and vulnerable. The Garden can be the world that we have always wanted, even if it is not real. It is a world of cool people, cool things, and cool experiences. It requires nothing from us. We aren't responsible for or to anyone.

**The Fall** is when our Inner Child was wounded. It is represented by anything that we feel has oppressed us. This can be the responsibilities of adulthood (a job, a relationship that requires fidelity, the burden of living consistently within the framework of a particular worldview). **SIN** is anything that happens to us that we don't like. It is seen as oppression from the outside forces of culture, government, or anyone else in authority or power. **SIN** has made us all **VICTIMS**.

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... when we are in charge, when we are free to design our perfect existence, when we think that this world is ALL ABOUT ME, we will never find the joy that Christ promised.

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**Rescue/Salvation** comes from organizing my life in such a way that I can get as much enjoyment as possible. It means finding the right place to live, the right people to hang out with, the right job, the right place to live, the right circumstances in which my Inner Child is never challenged or upset.

**The Problem** is that self-salvation is never attained. First, it is hard to AFFORD. Buying the life that we think will make us happy can break the bank. Second, the PEOPLE we thought would make us happy also thought that WE WOULD MAKE

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... the pathway to joy is to GIVE OUR LIFE AWAY as an expression of LOVE for others. On the other hand, the pathway to misery, anxiety, frustration and broken relationships is to be self-centered.

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THEM HAPPY. And so now we are both disappointed with each other on a continuing basis. Third, we are never quite sure that we have found the RIGHT PLACE to live, or the RIGHT PEOPLE to hang with, or the RIGHT JOB. And because we're aware that our youth won't last forever, we are filled with anxiety, wondering if we should stick with our current place, friend, or job—or move on. After all, there might be a better OPTION

someplace else. And because we are continuously anxious, we are never completely happy and fulfilled. We are haunted by the thought that we might be settling for something that isn't ultimate and amazing.

## Idol Worship and the Secular Salvation Paradigm

The problem with idol worship is that it feeds the Secular Salvation paradigm. And because it feeds this paradigm, it has the same PROBLEM—no rest and no joy. Likely the biggest driver of seeking “salvation / happiness” in something other than God is that it gives us a sense of CONTROL. But when we are in charge, when we are free to design our perfect existence, when we think that this world is ALL ABOUT ME, we will never find the joy that Christ promised.

Hip-hop star Drake put it well: *“There was a point where I felt like I needed to keep the company of a different woman every night. I was trying to fill a void. But in [those moments after sex, I’d know it wasn’t working. Those quiet moments are the realest moments a man will ever have in his life. The next day I’d convince myself to do it again. But during that time, I knew it wasn’t working.”*

Allow me to remind you what Jesus said to His disciples in John 15:9-11: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

In this statement of Jesus, we see that the pathway to joy is to GIVE OUR LIFE AWAY as an expression of LOVE for others. On the other hand, the pathway to misery, anxiety, frustration and broken relationships is to be self-centered. We know that we are self-centered because we try to USE OTHERS to make us

happy. When we use others instead of loving them, we are rebelling against God’s authority and right to tell us what to do. We are commanded by God to do what we see Jesus do (love), instead of doing what comes naturally (following the “desires of your former ignorance” (1 Peter 1:14, CSB). What we see here in Jesus’ conversation with his disciples is that submission to the COMMAND of Christ to love others as He has loved us is the only pathway to JOY.

**Scripture:**

**John 15:9-11** | *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

**Romans 14:17** | *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

**Meditate:**

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**Conviction:**

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**Connect:**

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