

Replacing God: Uncovering Our Hidden Idols

By Jimmy Needham

If the Old Testament had it's own Twitter feed, the trending topic every day would read #idolatry. In fact I wager that if you were to crack open your Bible at any place you'd have a fair chance of finding a verse addressing this topic. It takes first and second place in the ever-famous Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth"(Exodus 20:3-4). We see the practice of idol worship crop up early on in the Scriptures, not just in foreign nations, but in the community of God's chosen people, Israel. In fact, this particular sin would ultimately lead to the undoing and exile of the Jews at the hands of foreign powers. Author David Powlison once wrote that "idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the Scriptures."

With this much literary real estate given to the issue, it begs a question: Is idolatry an archaic notion meant to be eternally bound in the pages of our Old Testament, or might the mega theme of two-thirds of our Bible still have legitimate, relevant implications for life today?

Pick a Calf, Any Calf

When modern folks hear the word "idolatry" our minds often fly to third world lands, accessible only by boat or oxcart. It feels primitive. The word calls to mind images of half-dressed tribesmen or ancient peasants gathering around a wood carved animal, or if you're like me, Simon Cowell & Ryan Seacrest.

One of the most familiar scenes in the Bible regarding idols is the golden calf fiasco with Israel at Mount Sinai. Moses went up on the mountain to receive the commandments of God, and apparently he lingered a bit too long.

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Ex. 32:1)

Aaron obliged and fashioned for them a golden calf proclaiming, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (v. 4). In their impatience and fear, Israel quickly procured for themselves new leadership, a replacement god who they could look to for direction, something that could restore their hope. In a single decision this tiny nation taught us something very valuable: We always need a god.

The truth is you and I will most likely never smelt our jewelry down to craft a barnyard animal for our family to bow to, but we will always find something to serve, worship and derive worth from. The Bible calls these things “idols”.

What is idolatry?

Simply put, an idol is anything that we make more important than God. We mistakenly assume that all idols are sinful things like pornography and drugs. It’s important to realize that it is not the type of object that makes something an idol, but the type of honor we give to that object. Therefore, even the best things, when given inordinate levels of affection, can be idols to us. For example: A man’s job can be a very good thing for him and others. But if that man derives his identity and worth from his job, he has given it a role it was never able to perform. Those are shoes only God can fill in a person’s life. Suppose now, that a recession hits our hard working man and he gets laid off. If he only derived his worth from the status and lifestyle his job afforded him, losing his job would absolutely crush him. He has no stability when a job crisis hits. He is driven and tossed like a cork on the ocean surface.

It isn’t just jobs that run the risk of becoming idols. Spouses, houses, children, schools, body image, food, sex, money, friendships, intelligence, talents all have the ability to take a higher place than God in our lives. The problem with placing our hope in anything other than Jesus to give our life meaning and value is that it will always eventually let us down. Jesus Christ is the only one who never changes, and therefore His love and thoughts toward us never change either. He knows that anything we replace Him with will fail us which is why God warns so frequently against it in Scripture.

The Reason I Sing

Let me share an example from my own life. A few years ago, as I was writing songs for my third album, a friend and fellow artist was beginning to see some tremendous success from one of his songs on the radio. As I tried to write I found myself stifled. I couldn't create anything. I was crippled by envy and riddled with self-pity as I compared our two careers. My peace was shattered. Why? Because I had made an idol out of success. When I had it I was content, but as soon as the lime-light shown on someone else's career I was undone. God graciously revealed this to me in time to spare my heart and my career from ruin.

What We Can Learn from a Sci-Fi Movie

All of our sins, from the greatest to the least, have their root in an idol. Pastor Tim Keller writes "The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then come commandments 3 to 10. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, we never break commandments 3 - 10 without first breaking one and two." Our idols are always the primary impetus for our sinning. Therefore, in order to beat any one of our sin struggles, we must target the source. I don't say this often, but in this case, we should take a lesson from Hollywood.

Remember the 1996 summer blockbuster, "Independence Day"? It's your standard dilemma. Aliens attack earth. Earth responds with counter attack. Aliens have force fields. What to do? Thanks to Jeff Goldblum, our planet was spared. He figured out that by introducing a computer virus into the mothership, the other smaller alien crafts would also be infected, thereby disabling their shields and making them susceptible to attack. Destroying the source destroyed the soldiers as well. You remember how the story ends. Big explosion. Earth is saved. Will Smith catapults his acting career.

In our attempt to conquer our sin issues therefore, we must attack the source idol that is prompting our actions, not simply the symptoms. For instance, though you might be manifesting the sin of anger, the "mothership" idol driving your anger might actually be your desire for comfort, and when something or someone disturbs your comfort, you get angry. The Word of God will not allow a shallow approach to holy living. It demands that we dig deeper than surface issues and get to the root of the problem. This is the only way to see real lasting victory in our lives.

Our Hope

As we seek to penetrate into the depths of our motives, to expose the tender nerve of our motivating idols, we can be confident of this: God is for us in our pursuit. His desire is for our greatest good and for His maximal glory, and restoring us to Himself aides both. Call out to Him. Ask Him for grace to expose those 'gods' that have taken His place and He will do it. In the end, God alone is our only hope for lasting change. Remember also that in the universe, there is only One worthy of your worship. God alone made us and deserves all our hearts' affections. May He give you grace to resist any lesser love that would steal your joy and His glory. "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." (Isaiah 42:8).

QUESTIONS

1. According to the reading, what is the definition of an idol?
2. As you meditate on this lesson, to what have you given an unhealthy amount of value? What things (good or bad) have replaced God as your primary source of meaning and worth? Write them out specifically below.

GROUP DISCUSSION

3. In what ways does the gospel help us to rid ourselves from our heart's idols?
4. What are some practical ways for us to defend ourselves against idolatry in our own lives?