

Why does anybody do the things they do?

Lesson 7

It is not unusual to talk to Christians who find themselves trapped by some habit or sin pattern they desperately wish to break. Be it gossip, lust or anger and try as they may, they can't overcome it. Sin is like a disease. Treating the symptoms will not cure the disease. You don't help a flu patient by telling him he shouldn't have a fever. We don't have a problem, for instance, because we lie—we lie because we have a problem. We don't have a problem because we gossip—we gossip because we have a problem. The key to dealing with sin is not attacking the symptom but the root cause.

Why are we bitter? Why are we discouraged or worried or angry? The gospel always moves us beyond the symptom to look at the energy behind the sin. It tells us that something more important than Jesus is operating as our functional righteousness and worth. It may sound rather un-profound to say that our major sin is substitution, but that is what it comes down to. The sin energizing every sin is always substituting something for God.

In this lesson we begin to search out the insidious nature of our idolatrous hearts. You will be surprised and humbled at how subtle and pervasive is our idolatry. Especially when we begin to see that the most insidious form is our own self-righteousness.

Studying

Read Galatians 4:8-11

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. Read Romans 1:21-25 to get some background on Paul's view of idolatry.
 - a) What does verse 25 tell us happens when anyone rejects the worship of the true God?
 - b) What are the two results of idolatry (vs. 21-24)?
2. Read Galatians 3:8. What kind of religion had the Greek Galatians been saved from?
3. Look carefully at verse 9. What kind of religion are they in danger of turning to now? What are the implications Paul calls of the prospective lapse a "turning back" to idolatry?
4. How is Paul's statement in verse 9, "Now that you know God—or rather are known by God," an antidote to idolatry?

Reading

Read and study the following article making annotations in the margin.

Repentance

The Sin beneath Every Sin

By Paul Thompson

Every human being without exception is a worshiper. Everybody worships. There is within every human being an attachment to something which he feels absolutely essential for his happiness, meaning and worth. Human beings were created for God, but in rejecting God, mankind has substituted something else. The sin behind every sin is twisted worship. It is worshiping created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

The first two commands in the Decalogue (Ex.20: 3, 4) are directed toward our worship. We are not to worship false gods nor create false images of gods. The last command in the Decalogue is against coveting or desiring something deeply. To covet is to want something more than God. It's saying, "I've got to have this in order to make my life work. I can't be happy unless I have success, money, marriage, children, or a nice house and car." Coveting is being discontent with God alone and therefore substituting something else in His place. This is why in the New Testament Paul equates coveting with idolatry. It is interesting, then, to note that the Ten Commandments begin and end with idolatry. Idolatry is our fundamental problem. The Ten Commandments are bounded by idolatry, which means that in order to break commands 3-9 we have already committed idolatry.

Idolatry is always the reason we do anything wrong. We lie, we fail to love our neighbor; we steal, cheat and are angry because we have become worshipers of something that is not God. There is something besides God we feel we must have in order to be happy and that something is more important to our hearts than God. Idolatry is under every sin.

We all act as if God could not make us happy without the addition of something else. Thus, the glutton makes a god out of a sumptuous meal; the ambitious man makes a god out of his business; the mother makes a god out of her children. Does that mean that a good meal, a prospering business, or motherhood is wrong? Of course it is not. It's when these become objects of worship, when they have been twisted into becoming the chief object, the ultimate end of our desires and aspirations.

Idols, then, are not bad things. Most idolatry is not blatant, but rather rests deep within the world of our desires and quietly activates everything we do. Idols are basic, necessary things like love, relationships, money, health, success—good things made into the best. These are the things we deeply desire and must have to make life happy.

Rather than give us the desires of our hearts, however, idols are disappointing masters. In his discussion on idolatry in Romans 1:26, Paul says, "their thinking became futile and their...hearts darkened." "Futile," here means frustrated. We think things will satisfy us but they don't. Idols create a delusional field—that is, they create a false reality. For example, an anorexic has made her appearance such an idol that she thinks she is fat when everyone else can see she is dying of hunger. A rich person who has made an idol of material things never has enough and feels poor even when he may have more than he could ever spend.

Idols disappoint us, also, because they create addiction. Paul says in the same passage, "therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts." This means that the things we seek in order to find happiness sooner or later end up controlling us. We are "given over to them," that is,

we don't belong to ourselves, but to them. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by acceptance. We do not control our wants—our wants control us. Idolatry creates compulsiveness, a sense of driveness and dissatisfaction. Idols don't give our hearts what they so deeply crave, only a cheap substitute.

All of us, for instance, have had problems as Christians with repetitive sin, a pattern of sin we constantly fall into. It could be gossip, criticism, lust or lying. We try hard to stop it. We read our Bibles and confess our wrong. But the pesky sin continues to torment us. Our failure, often, is that we don't look for the idolatry which energizes the sin.

A Christian husband and father has a deep burning issue in his life. He says, "I'm always angry and I don't know why. I find myself shouting at my wife and kids without reason. Just the simplest detail will set me off. I'm destroying my kids and I know it. I've prayed about this. I've cried and repented a thousand times, but it doesn't seem to help."

In a case like this we could take this frustrated father to Ephesians 4 and read him verse 26: "Be angry and sin not." I would ask him, "Is your anger sin?" He would say, "It sure is." Then I'd advise him, "Just stop it. Ask Jesus to help you and just stop it. Count to 10 every time you feel anger coming on." In this scenario what would I be doing? I'd be making a left turn. I'd be telling him to do something, to obey to save himself. I'd be asking him to depend upon his will power and a few techniques in order to conquer his anger. Or I could invite him to take the gospel road, a "right turn" toward repentance. But repent from what? Of course, repent from his sinful acts of anger and the destructive results on his family. But more, to take a serious look at the idolatry behind his anger. You investigate deeper and find that he was raised in a broken home. His father left the family when he was but a boy. He feels wronged and abused.

What he must know, however, is that the reason he is enslaved to bitterness is not what his dad did to him. It's what his heart is making of the thing he lost. His dad robbed him of something. He lost the love of an involved father. And what he lost he thinks he must have in order to make his life complete. That is his idolatry. When he repents and believes the gospel and discovers the perfect acceptance and love of Jesus, deep healing begins to affect his life and actions.

Be warned: idolatry is most insidious when it invades our faith. I don't mean images in churches and parades on religious holidays—I refer to the "evangelical" variety clothed with Scripture texts and Sunday morning morality. We can make idols of our very best efforts and that is the most dangerous kind. This is what was happening to the Galatians' Christians. They had been gloriously saved from paganism (Ch. 4:8) and the addiction to blatant idol worship. But what were they being tempted to now? Read chapter 4:9 carefully, because if you don't you won't believe what I am saying. What does it mean, "*To return* to those weak and miserable principles?"

Why is Paul writing this book? The danger was not that they were falling back into paganism; they were being enslaved by morality. Their teachers were saying that Jesus and his righteousness was not enough. Before they had been bowing down to innate images, now they were about to go into a vigorous program of utter obedience to Biblical detail as a way to earn God's favor. Paul calls that slavery—no, this is even stronger—he calls that idolatry.

This is astonishing. Being incredibly moral, developing a strict moral code, living an absolutely pristine morality can be as enslaving as living in outright paganism. All of us are committed idolaters. We can make idolatry out of pagan religion and we can make idolatry of our Christian morality. Both are idolatry because both are ways to avoid Jesus as Lord and Savior. Either way

we are refusing the gospel of grace and trying to earn our own salvation. Self-salvation, however, is the more dangerous of the two because it deceives us. It lures us into thinking we are truly alive when in fact we are dead.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, your reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. Get into the text of Galatians 4:8-11 by discussing together the questions asked above.
 2. A good part of this session will be dedicated to discovery of our own deep idolatries, our "functional masters." A key question: What things tend to be too important to you?
 3. As a group discuss together these questions:
 - a. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go badly or get difficult?
 - b. What if I failed or lost this thing that I rely? Would it cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?
 - c. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
 - d. What unanswered prayer would make me think about turning from God?
 - e. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
 - f. What do I really want out of life? What would really make me happy?
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Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Discovering Idols Project

Project No 7

Our failure in discovering our personal idolatry often stems from failure to go deep enough in our analysis. For example, money is a very prevalent idol, yet it may not be a deeper idolatry, but, merely a means of attaining what at root the heart holds on to. Some people, for instance, want lots of money in order to control their world and life, while others want lots of money for access to social circles, others for making themselves beautiful and attractive. The same goes for sex. Some people use sex in order to get power over others in order to feel approved and

loved and others just for pleasure or comfort. The following chart may be helpful in analyzing our idolatries.

What we seek	Price willig to pay	Greatest nightmare	Others feel	Problem emotion
Comfort	Reduced productivity	Stress / demands	Hurt / anger	Bordem
Approval	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
Control	Loneliness/spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
Power	Burdened/repsonsible	Humiliation	Used	Anger

A. Study the above chart carefully and answer the following questions:

- What does it tell you about your idolatrous heart?
- What does idolatry do to our relationships?
- What does idolatry do to our emotions?
- What is the price idolatry for us?
- How does it enslave us?

B. Examine the following examples of idol-based “life-lies” and mark no more than three of those to which you seem most prone.

___ Power idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I have power and influence over others.

___ Approval idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am loved and respected by

___ Comfort idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life.”

___ Image idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I have a particular kind of look or body image.

___ Control idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of.

___ Helping idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if people are dependent on me and need me.”

___ Dependence idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.”

___ Independence idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.”

___ Work idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am highly productive getting a lot done.”

___ Achievement idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career.”

___ Materialism idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.

___ Religion idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am adhering to my religion’s moral codes and accomplished in it activities.”

___ Individual person idolatry: “Life only has meaning/ I only have worth if this person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me.”

___ Irreligion idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality.

___ Racial/cultural idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.”

___ Inner-ring idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.”

___ Family idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me.”

___ Relationship idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if Mr. or Ms. ‘Right’ is in love with me.”

___ Suffering idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if I am hurting, in a problem--only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt.”

___ Ideology idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power.

c. *Getting specific. Below list your main idols, as you understand them now. Try to discover and name your "NEAR" idols (more specific and concrete objects like spouse or career) and then think of the more powerful "FAR" idols which motivate you at a deep level such as power, approval, control, comfort.*

d. Spend time with your group discussing this lesson and **asking in what ways are your idols distorting your thinking or hiding themselves from you.**

e. As a group, spend time in corporate repentance admitting how deeply you have grieved and devalued Jesus and asking for forgiveness.