

# LOSING YOUR RELIGION—FINDING THE GOSPEL CENTERED LIFE

## LESSON 6: HEART IDOLATRY

*“There are more idols in the world than there are realities.”*  
Friedrich Nietzsche

*“Keep yourself from idols...” 1 John 4*

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight... James 4:1-2*

*“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.” Colossians 3:5*

### **I. IDOLATRY IN THE BIBLE**

- In the beginning....
- “[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God...and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom.1:23-25)
- Moses and the golden calf
- Prophets
- Idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong.

### **II. IDENTIFYING OUR IDOLS**

Strong emotions almost always tell us that an idol is at work.

**Consider some problem emotions:**

1. If you are angry. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry, because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?”
2. If you are fearful or badly worried. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared, because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?”

3. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so ‘down,’ because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?”

- Example of the surface sin of gossip
  
- Idols distort our view of self and world

*“I have no idea who was, or what I could be away from tennis. I was depressed and afraid because so much of my life had been defined by my being a tennis champion. I was completely lost. Winning made me feel like I was somebody. It made me feel pretty. It was like being hooked on a drug. I needed the wins, the applause, in order to have an identity.” Chris Everett*

**Diagnostic questions:**

- a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
- b. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?
- c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- d. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?
- e. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
- f. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

**EXERCISE 2**

### **III. DISMANTLING YOUR IDOLS – APPYLING THE GOSPEL**

Our problem is that we look to something besides Christ for our happiness. Repent and rejoice! We need to confront 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 will the idol’s power over us be 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 repented for your idols and rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

“The faith that...is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness....It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others...But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. There is a sense in which the strongest self-love that we can have...is merely the mirror image of the lively conviction we have that God loves us.

Moralism, whether it takes the form of either denunciation or “pep talks,” can ultimately only create an awareness of sin and guilt or manufactured virtues built on will power...We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christians life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace...”

Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life

**Repent:** Where is the smoke in your life? What is the fire? (See last week’s lesson)

**Nighttime Prayer:** Jesus, help me to be happy enough in you so that I am not:

**Proud** – boastful, defensive, condemning, critical, self-righteous

**Cold** – uncompassionate, withdrawn, demanding, self-pity, angry, impatient, irritated

**Scared** – anxious, panic, fearful of future

**Hooked** – over talking, lust, child-idolatry, craving relief

**Rejoice:** 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.

Meditate on this poem by John Donne. Make it a prayer—

*Take me to you, imprison me.  
For I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except YOU ravish me.*

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## Exercise 2 ▶▶

**Not only do we trust other things to bring us blessings,** we also trust ourselves. In other words, we can place ourselves on the throne, and set ourselves up as false gods. What are some of your chief idols?

▶ **Read through the list below. After you've finished, re-read the statements and check the ones that made you think: "That's me!" What desires (even good ones) rule your life?**

- People must listen to me. (They must give me their undivided attention. They must not look away when I speak to them.)
- I control my world. (Things must be ordered. Things must not break down or mess up. People must not mess around with me or catch me off guard.)
- I have the right to judge others. (Especially externals, because I cannot see into the heart. I judge their shortcomings and sin. I compare myself favorably with them.)
- I speak and it is done (Gen 1:1 – 31). (If things are not accomplished immediately, I am angry or defeated. My desire to change things rules me.)
- People must respect / honor me. (Including other drivers on the road. People must not bump into me on the street. They must knock before coming into my office.)
- People must obey me (especially my children).
- I have to be self-righteous. (Thus I defend, attack, condemn, adjust the record, destroy others records, excuse, build good karma, blame.)
- I glorify myself. (I am all-knowing, all-wise. I look down on others' mistakes; my opinions are all-wise and correct.)
- I do whatever pleases me. (TV, food, sex, shopping, entertainment, videos, computer games, vacations.)
- I have to look holy (especially pastors). (I have to appear perfect. I am Dr. Jekyll at church, but Mr. Hyde appears at home.)
- I am accountable to no one. (If you call me to account I get mad or raid the fridge.)
- I must be healthy. (I have a right to good health.)
- I must be independent. (I must not depend on anyone.)
- People must love me. (I want to be loved by....)
- People must serve me. (They must meet my "need.")
- People must not look at me. ("He 'dissed' me so he had to die" is an actual statement from a criminal in New York City who had just shot someone.)
- Life revolves around me. (I must be the center of my family life, my job, my church.)