

American Idols: Understanding Our Idolatries

Throughout all the eras during which the Bible was being written, God's people had a running confrontation with idolatry. Whether the gods of Egypt, the Baals of Canaan, Asherah, Molech, Dagon, Chemosh, the Babylonian god Marduk, or the pantheons of Greece and Rome, God's people in both Testaments were at all times either surrounded by or immersed in cultures that worshiped hosts of deities, idols who persistently seduced them—they were a constant spiritual threat. They filled the world around them: the skies above, the earth beneath and even the rivers, lakes and seas. They represented all the powers thought to be essential to life: love, power, beauty, fertility, technology, family, weather.

These gods had temples, priests and priestesses. They had rites and demanded sacrifice. All of life was shaped and controlled by the gods one served.

It still is. All of life is shaped and controlled by the gods one serves.

Even though we live centuries removed from the pagan idolatries of biblical times, we are not far removed from idolatry itself. Pastor Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, asserts that in fact: "...the human heart is an idol factory." [The inspiration for this series came from reading Keller's book.]

Keller is reflecting a significant biblical teaching from Romans 1:18-25—turn there with me and let's read.

Paul's argument is quite simple. He says that God has left his fingerprints all over his creation, enough so that anyone could look around them and quickly deduce that an ultimate, divine power beyond this creation is responsible for all that is.

But sin in us has distorted everything. What should have been clear gets lost in a fog of wickedness. The perceptions of our heart are clouded. As a result, we suppress truth about the one true God and create gods of our own making. Everything in all of creation can become a god for us. We have made the culpable choice to worship and serve created things, rather than the Creator.

What do you think of Paul's analysis? Do his observations about humankind still hold true today? We are 2000 years removed from the pantheons of Greece and Rome, and further removed from the ancient gods of the Middle-East. Does Keller's comment about the human heart being an idol factory make sense in our modern age?

Absolutely.

God called the Prophet Ezekiel to prophecy against his people. One of the charges God laid against them was this: "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts..." (Ezekiel 14:3).

Idols are not just cast images or carved figures before whom we offer our allegiance. Our idols exist in the temples of our hearts, cleverly hidden away the surface of our awareness. We aren't always conscious of them, but they are real none-the-less.

And they are, in a sense, necessary to our rebel selves. Blaise Pascal spoke of an "infinite abyss" in the human heart that "...can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself" (Pascal, *Pensees*). Some people refer to this as the God-shaped vacuum in our hearts.

Humankind must fill that vacuum. And having rejected God, the true satisfaction of our heart's deepest longings, we seek to fill it with other things to give vitality and meaning to our lives. These other things become the idols of our hearts.

As Christ-followers, we have, in the words of Scripture, "turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thes. 1:9-10). And yet, in those not-yet-redeemed places of our hearts, we harbor idolatries that even yet tempt us.

We are going to invest the next four weeks thinking about our heart idols. Pastor Walt suggested the series title: *American Idols*. It's an apt designation. We're going to consider idolatry from our uniquely American perspective.

Today we want to dig deeper into the nature of our idols. How do we identify the counterfeit gods that inhabit our hearts? What turns something into an idol for us? What markers distinguish a thing as a false deity?

Tim Keller writes: "What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."

Australian Pastor Mark Sayers adds: "Look at what your hope is in. There you will find your true religion."

Both of these men get at something significant. An idol is anything we treat as ultimate; anything we choose to fill up the "infinite abyss" in our souls; anything to which we offer what properly belongs to God himself; anything from which we derive our identity and purpose; anything that displaces God. More specifically, our idols are those things we love and fear, and trust and obey.

Love...

Jesus said the first great commandment is to love the Lord your God, heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus also said there is room in our hearts for only one deity to whom we give this kind of loyal devotion. That's why the first command calls us to have no other gods beside Yahweh.

In spite of this, heart idolatries have crept in. And we love the gods we choose. We love them because they promise us life. When they come through for us we feel on top of the world, invincible, powerful, significant.

I had a conversation this week with a pastor friend of mine who shared a conversation with another pastoral acquaintance. His friend has had a running battle with his weight. He said he once spent five-thousand dollars in a weight loss program, dropped over one-hundred pounds, and then gained it all back. His doctors ruled out physical causes such as genetics or metabolism.

As he reflected on this, he said it came to him that eating wasn't just a dietary problem or a discipline problem. It had become an idolatry. He used food to make him feel good and it had become an addiction. He was seeking from food something to fill up his soul hunger. He loved food because in the short run, it worked. It satisfied. It only took a little more.

On the news Friday morning we learned that Tiger Woods has been in a clinic for sexual addiction. This man who was voted athlete of the decade, who married a stunningly beautiful woman, is addicted to sensuality. He loves it ultimately and has sacrificed everything for it.

Our idols are those things we love supremely, things we think we can't live without. We may love power, control, beauty, money, romance, sex, sensuality, food, drugs, adventure, technology, success, adrenaline, material acquisitions, peer acceptance, social status, affirmation, respect, competence, family, education, hard work, freedom, self-actualization, etc. Usually we

have a constellation of deities, our personal pantheon of idols uniquely suited to work together to offer us life.

That's why we turn to them. We love what they offer.
What can't you live without?

Fear...

Love has a flip side. Those very things we love because we have invested them with the ultimate expectation of making our lives good, we also fear, because they have the same power to withdraw their gifts and destroy us.

Love and fear are healthy polar coordinates when rightly directed at the one true God. But when we direct them toward the idols of our heart, they become slavish things.

For instance, Katie Piper was one of those beautiful people whose stunning looks promised a bright future as a model. All that changed the day a man hired by her abusive boyfriend threw a cup of sulfuric acid in her face. She lost sight in one eye and has had to go through countless plastic surgeries.

In an interview, Katie said that the first time she saw her face in the mirror, she cried out to her mom, "Why didn't you kill me?"

What we assign the power to give life has with it the power to destroy us. Our idols are those things about which we say in our heart of hearts: "If I have this, my life will be worth living." But we also are forced to say, "If I lose this, or lack this, or cannot obtain this, I cannot go on."

In January of 2009, in a Newsweek web editorial, Linda Stern wrote: "Recent weeks have seen a spate of suicides by some of the most financially powerful people in the world. German billionaire industrialist Adolf Merckle lay down in front of a train after huge investment losses threatened his family's business empire. Chicago real-estate mogul Steven Good shot and killed himself in the driver's seat of his Jaguar after the property-auction business turned sour."

Then Stern quotes therapist Steven Craig: "In our world, we have come to a place where things like wealth and status become things that are intertwined with the self too much. When you have that loss of identity, and the shame and hopelessness they feel, the blow to themselves is so severe they don't feel like they can recover."

Craig is describing the idols of our heart. They twine around our hearts and shape our identity. They are those things we fear because of the terrors associated with their loss.

What are you terrified of losing?

Trust...Obey

For the sake of time, we must compress the two final markers of our idols. We used to sing the hymn, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

The two are linked. We will serve what we trust. And what we trust and obey, we call our gods.

For instance, we have referred to physical beauty as a heart idol of some. It brings acceptance, love and a certain amount of success. We have seen how it's loss can be terrifying. But think about how those who trust beauty serve it.

Plastic surgeons face the moral dilemma of treating patients, both men and women, who have become addicted to plastic surgery. These are individuals who have had multiple procedures and seem helpless to stop trying to reshape their looks in order to feel good about themselves.

They are trusting the next fix to give them the movie star looks that will solve their problems.

Those who have made an idol of beauty serve their god. They buff their bodies at the gym, spend exorbitant amounts on cosmetics and hair salons, and shop at the trendiest stores for clothes that make them stand out. They are truly slaves to fashion.

Don't misunderstand me here. There is nothing wrong with fitness workouts at a gym. There is nothing wrong with wearing attractive clothes or make-up. As the old preacher used to say, "If the barn needs painting, paint it!"

Such things become problematic for us when we put our confidence in them to make our lives work. When we say, "I could be happy if..." and we give ourselves to serve the demands of whatever we choose to fill in the blank.

Our idols are those things we love and fear ultimately. And because we love and fear them, we trust them ultimately and serve them, obeying the demands they place upon us. They fuel our addictions and shape our expectations.

When Paul wrote the church in Corinth, he said: "Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14). The Apostle John wrote the same thing: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

We cannot flee what we do not perceive. Next week, Lord willing, we will seek to identify some of the primary idols of our culture. The week after that, we will try to diagnose our own personal idols. Week four we anticipate examining a cure for our idolatries.

This week, take some time to think about what marks a thing as an idol, and ask yourself: "What do I see people in my culture loving more than anything else? What are most people afraid of? What do we trust? What do we give ourselves to in obedience and service?"

If we can identify these, we can begin to recognize the idols of our hearts. And once we do that, maybe we can do something about it.