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## *American Idols: The gods We Choose*

I'm a *Car Talk* fan. Tom and Ray Magliozzi bill themselves as "Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers." Tom has an earned doctorate from Harvard and Ray got his training at MIT. They are probably among the most highly educated, and certainly the funniest auto mechanics you would ever want to meet.

The *Car Talk* guys host a radio call in show on NPR in which people call in for diagnoses of their car's problems. Their callers describe issues with their vehicles and Tom and Ray suggest what needs to be fixed.

For instance, Champagne called with a new noise in her car, a kind of rumble and growl that she heard when her car was in reverse with the air conditioner on. It all began after an oil change. Click and Clack thought she had a loose heat shield. It turned out to be a loose tensioner on the timing chain. Come to find out, the oil change people left the engine two quarts low which allowed Champagne to hear the loose tensioner.

Click and Clack's advice to replace the heat shield was wrong because they misdiagnosed the problem. While it was a good guess given the facts they had, they lacked some critical information that distracted them from getting to the real issue.

Has anything like that ever happened to you? For instance, as you process the junk in your lives—and all of us have junk—how do you think about it? I have been greatly helped by the insights of counseling. It has helped me understand where some of my dysfunctions come from and why I am vulnerable to them. But understanding why I'm a mess has not necessarily produced change.

Dr. Larry Crabb suggested something in a counseling seminar that helped me more clearly connect the dots. It suggested a different diagnosis with a different course of action. He said that underlying many of our social/emotional problems were spiritual issues—two in particular. We have a wrong understanding of God's character, and we have personal idolatries. Dr. Crabb said "Whatever satisfies our longings most deeply will become our lord and master."

As I began to identify the idols of my heart, those things I loved and feared and trusted and served, I was better able to see how they shaped my values and decisions, how they contributed to distorted thinking and wrong choices. And I was also better equipped to take biblically based steps to effect change.

We have been immersed in a short series of messages under the broad title *American Idols*. We have looked at the human heart as a virtual idol factory, taking our cue from the prophet Ezekiel: "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts..." (Ezekiel 14:3).

Last week we suggested that spiritual evil lies behind our idolatries. We saw how each culture has its own pantheon of idols, uniquely crafted to define what is ultimate in the context of each culture.

Americans, we said worship at shrines of consumerism and hypersensuality. We love power, freedom, fame, celebrity and success. We give these things obedience and service that rightly belong to God. We trust them to make our lives work.

These are some of the idols most readily identified in these United States. But all of us do not serve all of them equally. We have personalized pantheons in our hearts, idols uniquely chosen for what we perceive to be their life-giving potential.

This morning, we want to consider some assessment strategies that may help us identify our personal idols. Knowing what counterfeit gods inhabit my heart will help enormously in determining my response.

As we begin, we need to pick up an insight from another Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah. Listen to what he says early on in his book: “Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the LORD. My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer. 2:11-13).

Jeremiah offers water as a metaphor for that which quenches our soul’s thirst, what satisfies our deepest longings. He says that God is a spring of living water. Jesus would build on this word picture during his ministry on earth: “‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive” (John 7:38-39).

God is life-giving in every sense of the term. But since the sinful human heart is a virtual idol factory, people refuse God in order to find their own satisfaction elsewhere. They look to things and people and experiences to quench their soul-thirst. God likens that to scrabbling around in the muddy bottoms of broken cisterns.

It is a compelling image—turning away from an artesian well bubbling up from the ground in favor of sopping up what remains at the bottom of a leaking water tank.

For instance, King Solomon wrote: “...I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy [his jealous rivalry] of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

Tom Brokaw had a TV special Thursday night on the Boomer generation—that generation of kids born after WWII. One of his observations about baby boomers was that we spend to excess. That shows up in the houses we buy for ourselves. Our parents were thrilled to pay \$8000 for post-war houses that boasted one thousand square feet. Some today have kitchens almost that big. We see what our neighbors have and we want just a little more; we always compare up. Why? To feel like we’re successful. To be the envy of the neighborhood.

God offers a soothing drink of water in a grace called contentment. We choose to slurp up whatever we can by borrowing to the hilt so we can buy to the max to get one up on our neighbors.

How do we go about choosing the idols of our hearts? Some we inherit from our families. For instance, a little boy who discovers his daddy’s stash of porn in the garage may himself get hooked into the same idol of vicarious sensuality. The little girl who witnesses mom’s obsession over financial security may come to put her ultimate trust in what money offers.

This is a good piece of how the sins of the parents are visited upon the children for generations.

Some idols we choose in order to cope with childhood pain. For instance, a child who suffers from a physically abusive parent discovers that keeping a low profile and excelling at school offers a measure of protection. He or she becomes the good kid, the quiet kid who gets good grades and never rocks the boat. Academic achievement not only keeps them safe from their fears, it offers a taste of acceptance and recognition. What has worked to protect from pain becomes a counterfeit god that offers a taste of life.

They are thrilled when they ace a test. They become morose and feel shame when they

bomb.

And some idols we choose because we are immersed in the messages and idolatries of our culture. Our immediate world convinces us that we must have certain things are essential to happiness: the right look, the right products, the right diet, etc. We pick those things that resonate with our deep longings and trust them to deliver.

But what things? How do we identify the idols of our hearts? If we serve that which we think will satisfy our deepest longings, how do we go about discerning what that might be?

Here we need to bring together what we know and understand about heart idols and ask God for wisdom. The great prayer that concludes Psalm 139 comes to mind: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Then we can begin to ask ourselves some probing questions. For instance:

- When you are in emotional distress, what seems to offer release? What eases the pain?  
For instance, how many of you have ever gone out and bought something just for the little high you got from the purchase?
- Where does your mind go for relief when you are lonely?  
The refrigerator? Facebook? I read laments from Facebook users about how much time they spend facebooking (it’s a verb) when they should be taking care of other responsibilities.
- When you are bored, where does your mind drift? Where do your daydreams take you?  
Our daydreams and fantasies offer great insights into the unmet longings of our hearts. Think about what you think about. What do your unguarded thoughts tell you about where you think life and satisfaction is found?
- What do you spend your time and money on?  
Jesus said our hearts may be found where we invest our treasures. What do you serve with your resources? If a spiritual director examined your check register, what might they conclude about the idols of your heart?
- When do you feel shame?  
The Bible makes a consistent connection between idolatry and shame. Our false gods always let us down. When they do, we experience shame—not the legitimate shame that comes from real guilt. This is false shame, what we feel for instance, when our peers turn on us for not having the right accessories; when we blow a test; when a boyfriend or girlfriend walks away.  
I remember sitting in a small group with a bunch of people and being confronted by someone who didn’t like a ministry decision I made. I watched myself shut down almost completely in shame. I looked at the ground and had nothing to say in response.  
I hadn’t done anything blameworthy. This was merely a difference of opinion. His complaint exposed an idol in my heart. I love affirmation and I fear being wrong. My experience of shame led me to ask myself why I reacted to powerfully. It helped me understand one of my broken cisterns, my counterfeit god.
- Do you have any besetting sins or persistent temptations?

We all do. Some sins keep tripping us up. Even when we aren't giving in to them, they nip at our heels and never leave us alone.

Why these sins in particular. What do they suggest about where we think our longings may be satisfied apart from God? Why are we so prone to turn away from God to serve these sinful desires?

God, speaking through Jeremiah chided his people: "Do not run until your feet are bare and your throat is dry. But you said, 'It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them'" (Jeremiah 2:25).

What do you feel you must go after, even at the expense of obedience to God?

- What keeps getting in the way of your love for God and the things of God: the words of God; the Church of God; conversation with God; service for Christ and his Kingdom and Gospel?

Many claim to be too busy. Why? Why do we run so hard? Sometimes life come at us faster than we care to think. And sometimes we choose busyness to fill the emptiness. It's noise to distract us from our heart's disturbing accusations.

Answer these questions with an open heart before God and you may gain some insight into the idols that still infest your heart. We know that we all have them. Even though we genuinely love God and are profoundly grateful for his grace to us in Christ, we still struggle with sin that will not be eradicated until we stand complete in Jesus in eternity. Until then, we will have to contend with what Paul called a law of sin "...at work in the members of my body" (Rom. 7:21-24). Paul added: "...I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

One of the ways that law of sin expresses itself is in the idolatries still lurking in our hearts.

In Jonah's prayer from the whale's belly, Jonah observed: "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs" (Jonah 2:8).

How do we move into grace? How do we deal with the idols to whom we have given space in our hearts. What resources do we have in our Lord Jesus Christ to expose the lies our idols tell us, to enable us to turn away from our empty attempts to satisfy our thirst from our broken cisterns, and to drink deeply from God's artesian well of living water?

That's what we want to look at next week.