

## *American Idols: Treating Our Idolatries*

Researchers at the University of Michigan announced last week that they had discovered one major reason why the HIV virus has been impossible to eradicate in infected individuals. Dr. Kathleen Collins, senior author of the study, says: “Antiviral drugs have been effective at keeping the virus at bay. However once the drug therapy is stopped, the virus comes back,”

She notes that while anti-viral drugs are life-saving, they cannot completely root the virus out of the body. “Infected cells are able to live on, undetected by the immune system, and provide the machinery for the virus to reproduce and spread.”

Researchers have now discovered latent traces of the virus hiding in bone marrow. Current therapies haven’t been able to touch it there. That’s why the HIV always comes roaring back after treatment.

The capacity of HIV to hide in our bone marrow is something of a metaphor for how the idols of our hearts function in us. When we came to faith in Christ, as much as we knew, we left our counterfeit gods behind, and began to worship and serve the one true God. In our first love for Jesus, our heart idolatries truly seemed to fade. Some of them lost their power altogether—but not all. After a time, after the flush of our first love, they always come back to tempt us.

Our idolatries hide in the recesses of our sinful nature. Pastor Tim Keller reminds us: “The human heart is an idol factory.” We will never be entirely free of them until that day when we stand complete before the throne of Christ in eternity. Until then, we fight a running battle.

But it doesn’t have to be a losing battle. While we can never quite talk about being cured of our idolatries—the cure awaits a better day coming—we can adopt strategies for substantial transformation. Our heart idols no longer define us and they need not control us. God has provided spiritual resources for us in Christ to contend with those sinful parts of our not-yet-redeemed selves.

The very first commandment God gave Israel was this: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:3-6).

It is crucial for God’s people to identify and to deal decisively with our internal pantheons of counterfeit gods. As we have looked at this over the past few weeks, we have had ample opportunity to look inside ourselves and identify those things that supplant our love and service for God. They are things we cherish as lifegiving; and things so threatening they terrorize us. They are things we trust to come through for us and things whose demands we obey and serve.

Whatever our hearts treat as ultimate become our gods. So what do we do when we discover a counterfeit god? What do we do, for instance, when we find ourselves flirting once again with a persistent temptation? How do we respond when the seduction of some thing draws our love and loyalty away from God?

Job one is repentance.

Repentance is one of those old words that has suffered greatly from overuse and abuse. We associate it with fanatical preachers, emotional manipulation, and wrenching convulsions of the soul. Repentance is a scary word for us. Whatever it is, we don't want to go through it.

It's our misfortune to lose such a powerful word. Repentance is a spiritual reality check. It's a truth word. It's what happens when we come to our senses about wrong we may have done. The word translated repentance literally means to change one's mind.

When we talk about repenting of our heart-idols, we're talking about coming to the realization that we have allowed some thing to displace God. When we repent, we acknowledge in God's presence what we have done. We identify our counterfeit god and acknowledge our defection.

The prophet Hosea preached a tough message to God's people about their idolatries. He issued this invitation: "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say 'Our gods' to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion'" (Hosea 14:1-3).

A pastor friend of mine in another state told me about an experience he had on a ministry training retreat he attended. The retreat was at a conference center in a secluded location. The first night there he sat at a table and noticed an attractive woman across from him. She was responsive to his attention, laughed at his jokes, and made eye contact frequently.

The next day she joined a pick-up game of beach volleyball he was playing, and again, they connected easily. Neither of them had crossed any lines, but he could feel the lift in his soul every time he saw her. He said it was like being a teenager again.

It suddenly struck him that this was not, nor could it ever be innocent. He was flirting with the idea of her in ways that scared him. Deeply shaken, he cried out to God, acknowledging that he was creating an idol in his heart by investing in this young woman the power to make him feel alive. The temptation was there to turn his back on his wife and ministry and go for the moment. He named the sin, identified the idolatry, and confessed what was going on in his heart. He still felt the pull of the temptation, but it had lost its overwhelming power.

That's repentance. We undergo an internal shift in our hearts, acknowledge the sin as sin, and bring words to God openly confessing the wrong that we do and have done.

We need to hear what God says next through Hosea. To those who bring words of repentance, God says: "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them" (Hosea 14:4).

Two powerful emotions tug at us to keep us from repentance and confession of sin: fear and shame. We're afraid of God's anger. If we acknowledge our sin to him, we're terrified that he might smite us with grievous afflictions. And we're ashamed. Like Adam in Eden, when God shows up, we want to hide.

But God meets our confession with forgiveness and cleansing. He'll walk with us through the sometimes messy job of cleaning up the messes we may have created. But he will never meet our repentance with shaming rejection.

We learn a second step in dealing with our idols from the example of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. One example will suffice. During the wilderness wanderings of Israel after the Exodus, they complained time and again about living in the desert.

On one occasion "...they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you

brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food” (Num . 21:5)! By miserable food, they meant the *manna* God provided for them freely every day.

“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died” (Num 21:6).

Remember that story? When the people repented, what did God do? He had Moses make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looked on the snake was cured of the snake venom.

Israel kept that bronze snake as a memorial of God’s deliverance. They kept it for seven-hundred years. By the time of Hezekiah, it had become a holy object, something so steeped in legend and mystery that people had begun worshiping it as a god. You see, even things God has used powerfully in our lives can be reduced to counterfeit idols. Some of the energy found in our worship wars, for instance, can be traced to this kind of idolatry.

During the reforms of King Hezekiah, the Bible says: “He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan)” (2 Kings 18:4).

Repenting of our heart idols is the first step. A fruit of that repentance is getting rid of them—breaking our bronze snakes, those things that give expression to our false gods.

I heard one young man tell about what happened when God got hold of his heart about his obsession with internet porn. One day, disgusted with himself, he ripped his computer out of the wall connections, and smashed it against the wall.

Extreme? Perhaps. There are internet accountability programs that can serve as a protection for you. But for him, he needed not to have access to the internet at all. A good thing had served a false god.

If too much shopping has you enslaved and in debt, your bronze snake might be credit cards. Cutting them up could be an outcome of repentance.

I had a man in my office confessing an inappropriate relationship with a married woman. He knew it was wrong, was repentant and confessed his sin openly. I told him he needed to do one more thing: call her and break it off.

When it dawned on him what I was asking, he said, “You mean right now?” I said, “Yes, right now.” And he made the call.

We cannot repent of our idols and maintain access to them at the same time.

Getting rid of our idols sometimes calls for wisdom. For instance, a mom who has made counterfeit gods of her kids can’t send her brood packing. She is going to need wise counsel, perhaps from a godly, discerning mentor who can help her identify how her neediness and obsession with hyper-parenting has displaced her love for and service to God, and what to do about it.

But we cannot do nothing. Repentance means being sorry enough about our sins to change.

There is a third step. And here we refer back to something we mentioned in our first message. Remember the quote from Blaise Pascal? He 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*).

Our idolatries are our own attempts to fill that abyss, that spiritual void, with something

other than God. When we get rid of the idols of our hearts, we cannot leave a vacuum. We must fill it with our heart's true longing, the pursuit of God himself.

Turn with me to Colossians 3:1-5; 9-10; 17. Very simply, what this passage calls us to is refocusing our affections, our attentions and our identities upon Jesus Christ. Setting our minds on things above means investing time and energy absorbing God's thoughts in God's word. It calls us to worship, directing our hearts toward adoration and praise. It is a call to service, to prayer. All of the classic disciplines that God's people have found helpful in the pursuit of Christ become important.

If we only do steps one and two, if we merely repent of our sin and get rid of our old idols, but refuse to engage life with Christ, then the abyss in our hearts will suck us back into our old ways. We will either cast about for new idols to fill the void or we will slip back into old heart habits of familiar idolatries.

Paul describes the change this way: "taking off your old self with its practices and putting on the new self." The old self is our old identity with its sinful habits that marked us before we came to faith in Jesus. Our new self is our new identity as people who have been immersed into Jesus, who now seek to act like he acted. They do everything in his name because they bear that name.

Understand something significant here. The pursuit of God is an ongoing quest, not a stop along the way. It is the work of a lifetime, not a destination.

We may have moments, and this may be one for you, when we are stopped in our tracks and confronted with the idols of our hearts. We may repent authentically and make decisive steps to rid ourselves of our idolatries. But one decision is not the end of the matter. It engages one battle; it is not the whole war.

The temptations return, and God continues to draw our hearts. What matters is the settled direction of our hearts. Which way are we headed?

We will not be completely free of heart-idols until we stand complete in Jesus in eternity. But we can be substantially free. It takes habituating ourselves to these three steps: repentance, destruction of our counterfeit gods, and keeping our hearts fresh toward God.

If this is a moment of conviction for you, if God's Holy Spirit has put his finger on one or more heart-idols that you cherish, are you willing to repent? Are you willing to name it openly before God with unflinching words of acknowledgment and confession?

Are you willing to take clear steps to get rid of anything that draws your heart away from God?

Are you willing to set your heart and mind on things above, pursuing your life in Jesus and finding your heart's treasure in him?