

Idolizing Lesser gods

Daniel 3:1-7

Introduction: In 2009, Tim Keller came out with a book on idols which I read and was quite impactful. One of the reasons that he wrote it was the response and reaction in the US after the housing market crash in 2007-08. Many of you will remember how housing prices plunged, loans were called, and foreclosures were rampant. This lead to many heart-wrenching consequences and responses:

"After the global economic crisis began in 2008, there followed a tragic string of suicides of formerly wealthy and well-connected individuals. The acting CFO of Freddie Mac...hanged himself in his basement. The CEO of Sheldon Good, a leading real estate auction firm, shot himself in the head behind the wheel of his red Jaguar. A French money manager who invested the wealth of many of Europe's royal and leading families, and who had lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money in Madoff's Ponzi scheme, slit his wrists and died in his Madison Ave. office...It was grimly reminiscent of the suicides in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash."¹

We have heard stories similar to these I'm sure, and several thoughts enter our mind: 1) This is a sad reality of those who have lost hope, 2) This reality HAS been true and WILL continue to be true in our world, 3) It seems so frivolous to take one's life after losing something like money. It wasn't a loss of loved ones, health, or physical pain, but paper currency. What drove these to such despair? Why could some not push through the crash and see hope on the other side, solace in loved ones, or especially the grace of God in things? The answer is the same problem that we possess today: ***Idolatry, or the worship of lesser gods.***

Before venturing into a favorite chapter in Daniel, chapter 3 which tells one of the most dramatic Sunday School stories ever and gives one of the best responses to temptation and persecution in all of Scripture in verses 17-18, we need to do a bit of digging Biblically to get our minds and hearts around this issue of idolatry. Chapter 3 starts with King Nebuchadnezzar setting up a massive gold statue, a colossal image of his god and a monolithic monument to his pride. He will have all of the leaders of his nation bow down to it or face the fiery furnace, and we find three, brave, uncompromising Jewish young men who stood when all others bowed, who faced certain death with confidence because they knew the living and true God. The **reason to get our minds around idolatry** is the fact that though Scripture is full of warnings against idolatry, and though we are ALL PRONE TO THIS SIN, we often do not talk about, examine, or identify idols in our own hearts and lives. We relegate idolatry to bowing down to a gold image or burning incense to a statue or pouring out essential oils before some other man made edifice. The reality, however, is just as Nebuchadnezzar, his royal officials, and other Jewish exiles bowed down to worship a foreign god that they watched get made, so **today we struggle with misplaced worship, placing our trust, hope, and happiness on manmade creations rather than our God in Christ who is the fountain of living waters.**

DEFINING IDOLATRY:

Maybe the most fundamental question to answer is *what is an idol?* Is it simply a piece of wood or statue? Tim Keller helps us again: *"An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart or imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...if anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning of life, and identity,*

¹ Timothy Keller, "Counterfeit Gods", p. ix - x, introduction.

then it is an idol." The foundation of idolatry is **worship**, a bowing down to and living for whatever IT is. An idol can be anything, a good thing that we make into an ultimate thing, replacing the place only God should have. Idols are what control our time, thinking, dreams, and where we ultimately find pleasure and satisfaction. But what does the Bible say about idols?

1. We were created to worship ONE GOD, and everyone fundamentally worships something:

Mankind was created to worship God alone. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, all the while enjoying the God they knew and walked with. He is a jealous God, whose name is Jealous (Exodus 34:14), who will share His glory with no other (Isa. 48:11), and will not compete with other entities. That is why in the **10 Commandments** given to Moses and Israel, the issue of idolatry and worship are front and center:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other god before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

Exodus 20:2-6

God is not jealous in the impetuous, college romance way (I don't like how she looked at him!). But He is jealous in the "I made you for my glory and demand sole rights to your heart, mind, and affections because I created you and am the only one who can satisfy the longing of your heart" kind of way. He's jealous because we sign a non-compete with Him. Chasing after other gods, lesser gods is the definition of sin and the height of rebellion.

2. Mankind, all of us, exchanged the worship of the TRUE God for lesser gods

The problem of the human heart is NOT a lack of information, it is that our hearts are set and fixed on **rebellion** against what we know. We resist any authority in our life, want total autonomy, and flee from any deity that puts ANY restrictions on us. This is why evangelism is NOT simply about the art of communication, since it is only God who can save mankind from their own rebellion, forgiving their wicked heart, and giving them new eyes to see. No amount of persuasion or free choice could overcome the sinfulness of our nature, only God through His grace and the work of Jesus Christ could do that. This is the essence of the argument of Romans 1.

God's wrath is revealed against the unrighteousness of mankind, who have seen and know what God has revealed to them, but they/we suppress the truth (1:18-19). God reveals His eternal power and divine nature in creation so that no one has an excuse when it comes to knowing that He is and that He is divine (20).

"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

Romans 1:21-23

What is idolatry? An exchange. Trading worship of the only true, powerful, eternal God of the universe for something that can be seen or made by man. It is the height of foolishness. Have you ever seen pictures of idols in other cultures? Statues of men with bird heads and eagles wings, or big bull like animals with big horns, or trees that people throw shoes in to appease the gods (I've actually seen that one). We step back and think, "How crazy!? How foolish?! We would never!" But that is before we understand our own idols, which are just as crazy and foolish, but much more refined and sanitized!

IDENTIFYING IDOLATRY

So what are idols? *How do we identify idols in our lives, since none of us are foolish enough to stare at something for hours and hours on end for no particular purpose.*

1. Idols are produced as God replacements in order to find happiness, satisfaction, and meaning:

"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound with their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and shield"

Psalm 115:3-9

There are several key principles about identifying idolatry in our life. 1) An idol is something that we trust in over God. God is sovereign over all, demanding glory and idolatry is giving glory and making much of anything other than God, which is by definition, **worship**. 2) We make idols based on our definitions of God HIMSELF. In other words, idolatry is crafting items of worship based on the God we create for ourselves. If God wants us to be rich, I will create a god who is pleased by that. If God wants me to play out all of my sexual desires no matter the cost, I will create a god who is glorified by that.

Our God created mankind in His image so that we would glorify Him, but mankind creates god in his image in order that we could be glorified by him.

3) Idols are then crafted and created by us, to pursue and worship. It's not difficult to make a list pretty quickly as we start asking the question of our own mind and heart as to what we turn to before God. There are the biggies and easily identified: we seek after **possessions** or material gain as our highest goal, believing that bigger, better, and more will somehow satisfy. Dr. W.S. Reid said "*The principle god our times is our standard of living. We are so concerned with material possessions that we have forgotten they are a gift from God.*" **Power** or control is sought by others, which easily manifests in the hoarding of **money**, which enables us to control our own future or others. **Pleasure** is the American ideal, which means we believe a comfortable life is a God given right, and we will do anything to gain it and keep it. **Sexual expression and freedom** is a growing ideal, making all of life to boil down to playing out sexual desire and getting rid of any institution (family, government, or religion) that would tell me I can't or tell me it's wrong. **Self** is an idol, seeing ourselves as the MOST important entity, and my **freedom** as something to be guarded and fought for, even if it means violating Biblical commands. **Amusement, sports, and education** are all things that are great gifts but terrible masters, and when we covet these, sin or neglect Biblical responsibility to get them, we have idolized and worshipped the creation rather than the creator.

How are you doing on this list? But we are not done because idolatry is more than just external or created things.

2. Idols are produced out of our heart, making good things into ultimate things, creating idols out of gifts God intended us to enjoy by glorifying Him.

Tim Keller stated that our hearts are idol factories, pumping out idolatry if not controlled by something greater. All sin resides in our heart first and manifests itself in action second, which means to identify idols we must understand how idolatry works. In **Ezekiel 14:1-5** God identified the issue with the leadership of Israel and the people:

"Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the Word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, these men have taken idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD God: Any of the house of Israel who takes idols into their heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols."

This is a sobering reality. Idolatry keeps us estranged from God, puts up stumbling blocks to our true joy and satisfaction, and must be repented of (verse 6). **What does this mean practically?** We can take even the best of things and make them idols. This means that we must be persistent in our evaluation in worship (beyond just singing) and make sure we are pursuing the **gift giver, not just the gifts**. We often think and pray in a way that thinks, "If only God would give me _____, I'd be happy." But this is often a lie. In fact, it's His grace that keeps us from receiving things that would only move our heart away from Him. **Romans 1:24-25 says it this way:**

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

Getting the desires of our hearts is often a **punishment or consequence of sinful idolatry**, not a blessing. We get what we always wanted, neglecting the God who is the source of all things, and realize even THAT thing did not satisfy, that we still want more, and that we are still wallowing in misery. So how does this subtle idolatry happen?

One of the most obvious and difficult idols to identify for us is **people**, particularly when it comes to family and children. Children are a gift from the Lord (Ps 127:3-6) and a blessed stewardship. We are given the responsibility to train, teach, and point them to Christ. We get 18+ years to model for them what it looks like to make much of Christ and glorify God, both in positive ways and in dealing with our inevitable failures and sin. But we also know that kids are **not ultimate**. Marriage is not **ultimate**, since it is a picture of Christ's love for the church (Eph. 5:32) and marriage is momentary (Matt. 22:30). That means we have to have the right perspective in both relationships, since we so easily make these into ultimate things, even ahead of God. How?

- 1) **We value them more than obedience to God** - If that is so, we will shortcut the promises and commands of God to try to make our spouse or kids **happy**, not realizing their greatest happiness is found in a reconciled relationship with God in Christ.
- 2) **We live our lives vicariously through our kids** -

Some want so desperately to give their kids everything, every experience, opportunity, or advantage, putting undue pressure on them to succeed, get a scholarship, or do the things we never did or could. When a **personal relationship becomes our god**, that person can never satisfy us and only will breed frustration and potential separation 3) **They are our source of hope, and if taken away, life would hardly be worth living** - If God chose to take my wife or kids away before He took me home, I'd experience sorrow upon sorrow (Erin would as well since she idolizes me --- most likely). HOWEVER, this sorrow should not stop me from living to God's glory, trusting Him, finding joy in Him, and continuing to serve Him until my death.

There are two vivid illustrations of this in Scripture, both of a father and a mother willingly giving their kids up in order to obey the Lord, which is the greatest source of satisfaction. The first is found in **Genesis 22** where Abraham had waited a lifetime for a son, and after God had provided one, called him to sacrifice Isaac on an altar. Abraham believed God would provide a substitute or even raise him from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19), even though he had never seen that happen. God tested Abraham to see if he would trust Him more than gift of Isaac, and God was pleased because he did not withhold his son (Gen. 22:16). In **1 Samuel 1**, Hannah had prayed for God to open her womb, and God heard her prayer after dealing with infertility for years. After giving birth to Samuel and weaning him, she said, "**For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as He lives, he is lent to the LORD.**" (1:27-28). Two parents who waited for children, willing to give them back to the Lord, since God was their only hope and source of worship. This is perspective much needed today.

IDOLATRY REPLACED

How do we deal with idolatry? The solution cannot be getting rid of our idols alone (can't get rid of our kids, spouse, etc.), so what is the answer? The answer is in the same word that leads us into idolatry: **replacement**. Idols are an exchange of worshipping the true God, so dealing with idols means replacing our idols with the true satisfaction, the true God.

God is clear. We are to **flee from idols** (1 Cor. 10:14), **repent of them** (Ezek. 14:6), **turn to God from them** (1 Thess. 1:9), **put them to death** (Col. 3:5), and **keep ourselves from them** (1 John 5:21). We do this by pursuing SOMEONE far greater, satisfying, and glorious than any idol. Colossians 3:1-4 says that **we seek the things that are above, set our minds on things above rather than earthly, and recognize** that our life is hidden with Christ and we will be with Him in glory. In other words, we fight idolatry by fighting to believe that Jesus is better, and setting our minds and hearts to pursue Him. We already know what it looks like to pursue idols! Now we turn from them and take that same pursuit in our relationship with Him, crafting our mind, actions, obedience, dreams, imagination, and desires to glorify Him. This means we must identify idols, confess our sin, turn, pursue, and repeat.

Coming back to **Daniel 3** we see now what Nebuchadnezzar's problem was. He had knowledge of the true God after his dream was interpreted (2:47), but instead of yielding himself to that God, made an image of worship that would display **loyalty from his people**. But he had to coerce the leaders to actually do it, since failure to do so would have brought about death in a brick kiln that most likely was used to create the giant image. Nebuchadnezzar wanted the glory to feed his pride. The people bowing down wanted to keep their positions and their bones and skin. Only 3 men would stand. The rest were willing to worship an idol because it gave them what they truly wanted.

What is the ultimate replacement of idols? It is the all satisfying person and work of Jesus Christ. "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **God made alive together with Him**, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by **canceling the record of debt that stood against us** with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Col 2:13-14). He gives us His joy that our joy may be full (John 15:11) and that we would know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17:3). Christ is greater than anything idols can offer. When He is our greatest value, source of happiness, satisfaction, and meaning, idols are obvious and able to be put to death.

What are the idols of your heart? Is Christ ruler and greater than all of them? Let's stop spending time on lesser gods when the eternal, powerful, revealed God of the universe has made Himself known to us and reconciles us through Jesus Christ.