

the first time. It humbled me, and it heightened my love and appreciation for the gospel and my Savior. It has deepened my awareness of my dependence on Christ to rule my life moment by moment.

And it's been hard.

The valley indeed was dark, but God has done an incredible work, not only in our marriage (we are now the best of friends, as well as lovers!), but also in the way I preach and teach, and how I relate to others, both inside and outside our church family. I am reminded of Ephesians 3:20, seeing that God really is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.” My wife and I had desperately wanted deliverance from a marriage that we felt trapped in, but God did more—he revolutionized our ministry and our passion for the gospel, for our Savior, and for the church.

I pray that God will use this book to help get the life-changing message of exposing and repenting of idols of the heart into the hands of as many people as possible.

In the chapters ahead, I will lay out a plan to help you identify and destroy the idols that keep you enslaved to certain sins in your life, sins that keep you from experiencing gospel joy and freedom. I will show you how to keep the main thing the main thing. But I warn you, it's not fun. It will hurt, and it will get ugly when you start to see what is going on in your heart.

Look to Christ. Don't let this study turn you into a navel-gazer who is more caught up in examining your own heart than in delighting in your Savior. Fix your eyes on Christ, and on the wonders that he has secured for you, as you step into the dark labyrinth of your heart.

So before we begin, stop and pray that God will show you more of the beauty of your Savior, even as he reveals more of the ugliness and deception of your idolatrous heart.

PART 1

SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

CHAPTER 1

IDOLATRY STARTS WITH GOSPEL DRIFT

A biblical understanding of idolatry dramatically changed my own life and exposed how far I had drifted from the gospel. It radically changed my understanding of everything—my marriage, my parenting, my pastoring, and my counseling. Idolatry is perhaps the Bible’s most pervasive theme. We think of the great themes in Scripture: the grace of God, the glory of God, the sovereignty of God. We love to talk about these (as we should), but there’s another, largely untapped, theme whose threads are woven throughout the Bible: idols of the heart. And this idolatry flies in the face of our Savior and the freedom that he purchased for us on the cross.

To move toward idols is to move away from the gospel and the Savior that the gospel proclaims, so the problem is not peripheral—it is central. Anything that prevents the gospel from having center stage in your life will dramatically affect the way you live and hinder the degree to which you can glorify God. And when the gospel loses center stage, your spiritual immune system shuts down, leaving you susceptible to a myriad of spiritual illnesses.

That's why, in 1 Corinthians 15:1–3, Paul stresses the priority of the gospel:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. . . .

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. (NIV)

C. J. Mahaney said, “If there’s anything in life that we should be passionate about, it’s the gospel. . . . I mean passionate about thinking about it, dwelling on it, rejoicing in it, allowing it to color the way we look at the world. Only one thing can be of first importance to each of us. And only the gospel ought to be.”¹

IDOLS MOVE IN WHEN THE GOSPEL MOVES OUT

Yet countless Christians live every day with something other than the gospel holding first place in their lives. When I say *idolatry*, you might think, “That’s the Old Testament. As the New Testament church, we’re under grace.” Is that what comes to your mind? Do you think of idolatry as existing only in the Old Testament? Or do you think of some statue or totem pole, and someone in a third-world country bowing down to it? Do you ever think of yourself? If not, therein lies the problem.

Biblical counselor and author David Powlison observes, “Idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the Scriptures. The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry.”²

IDOLATRY IS A PERVASIVE PROBLEM
TODAY

But if you're still thinking, "Sure, idolatry's a big deal, but it's in the Old Testament, not where I live," then look at just one verse in the little New Testament book of 1 John, the very last verse. It is worth noting how John ends his letter. After giving us 105 verses on the vital importance of a warm, vibrant, loving fellowship with Christ our Savior, how does the apostle of love wrap it all up? Of all the ways he could have ended this passionate letter, he closes it, in 1 John 5:21, with this sober warning: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen."

So what have you been doing with this verse? Have you been skipping over it, ignoring it, or wondering why it's there? Did John lose his train of thought? Is he changing subjects? Is it a scribal error? Not at all. You see, gospel treason—gospel drift—inevitably leads to idolatry. We are worshipers by nature. Our hearts don't just drift aimlessly; the drift is always away from the gospel, away from our Savior, and into the grip of something or someone else.

The last little line in John's letter leaves us asking the most basic question of all, the question that God brings to our hearts every moment of every day: Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken the title deed to your heart? Does something or someone else hold your heart's trust, loyalty, and desire?

You say, "Of course not. I put my trust in Christ when I became a Christian. He holds the deed to my heart." Unfortunately, many times, although Christ owns the property, we live like traitors, having given the right of ownership to other people and other things. Yes, Christ is the owner, and that will be evident when the dust settles. But we are prone to giving our

hearts to squatters all the time. That's why John leaves us with this warning: *Keep yourselves from idols.*

Don't give your heart away like a spiritual orphan or prostitute.

The Christian life is more than just trying to stay connected to Christ and loving him. If you don't also keep a vigilant eye toward detecting idols and then destroying them, you'll inevitably get trapped.

You might confess with your lips, "Jesus is Lord," but in your functional, practical life, what really motivates you? Most of us have a confessional theology that looks good and lines up with sound biblical doctrine, but what really drives us on Monday morning is our practical or functional theology—which can be way out of line. You might say, "Jesus is Lord," but in your life—your thoughts and your desires and your affections—you might be dominated by something such as winning your husband's approval, moving up the company ladder, or having the perfect family. If so, you're only fooling yourself, because these other things are really your lord, your idol—the gospel and Jesus Christ have been pushed to the margins. That other person, idea, or dream is your master, and it takes you over without your being aware of it.

OUR IDOLATRY FLIES UNDER THE RADAR

Nobody wakes up one day and says, "I'm going to start living for the approval and affection of my husband. That will be my ruling passion starting right now, and I will refuse to find comfort in God, his Word, and his promises until I get the approval and affection from my husband that I crave." Nobody voices that thought out loud. Nobody types that up and makes copies to hand out to friends and family and coworkers. Even so, you have made a definite switch that affects how you think and

act toward others. And that's why your behavior and attitudes are so confusing to those around you.

Millions of people—including Christians—live this way without even knowing it. They're trapped, they're deceived, and they're miserable because they have made a functional god of something or someone other than the one true living God, which leads to misery and chaos every time. Part of what makes this battle so tough is that we don't recognize the idolatry we've bought in to. We recognize the misery and the chaos, so we ramp up the prayers—and usually the complaining—but after a while, when we are still miserable, we start to doubt God's faithfulness and the power of prayer because he's not helping us to get what we want.

But unlike us, God sees perfectly. We don't see that what we're asking God to give us is an idol, but he does. He sees that we've shifted from the gospel and our Savior as our sole source of joy and purpose. God won't help us to chase our idols. He is a jealous God. In Isaiah 42:8, he proclaims, "I *am* the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images." When God sees you pursuing the glory of another, he's not going to help you get it. Pray all you want, fast, give up your favorite desserts and snack foods, all to no avail—because God smells idolatry.

So why don't we smell it?

God has given us his Word to serve as smelling salts, to rouse us from the idolatrous coma we live in so much of the time. We're locked into our own idolatrous way of thinking and living until we pick up God's Word, and then, *boom!* A wake-up call—we've been seeing things wrong; we haven't had the complete picture. There's truth in the Scripture that hasn't been on the table of our mind. And God's Word brings us back to the Savior, back to the gospel.

If you haven't figured it out yet, Christ is the main character of the Bible, and redemption—the gospel—is the theme. Why? Because God knows that we drift and need to be brought back again and again to the Savior, and to the sin-shattering, idol-smashing gospel.

IDOLATRY IS A LIFELONG BATTLE

Now, before you get too excited about coming back to your Savior, getting back to the gospel, and dealing with idols of your heart—and I hope you are excited about it—let me give you a caution. Don't think, "Great—this is the day I slay all the idols of my heart. As soon as I figure out what they are, I'll have an incredible revival service and repent of them all and be done with it. I'll park myself at the feet of Jesus, like Mary in Luke 10, and never leave. No need to read the rest of *this* book, because that will be it; I'll be done."

I wish that were true. But you must understand that detecting and destroying idols is an ongoing battle, not a showdown. You'll have plenty of showdowns, to be sure. But it will be tough, because idols don't go to the mat easily. They don't just give up. It's better to think in terms of a war with multiple showdowns for as long as Christ leaves you in this life.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is . . . desperately wicked; who can know it?" That's why this battle can't be won with some cute little Christian techniques or tricks that you can pick up at your local Christian bookstore. It can be won only with the sword of the Spirit, as the Word of God cuts through our heart's protective layers to expose and excise what's really going on, so that real change can begin. You must focus on God's Word rather than techniques or principles. Make God's Word your focus for freedom from idols.

James 4:1–3 gives the plain truth:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Notice in this passage how prayer is tied in to the deal. So many times when we're not getting an answer to prayer, we get frustrated and think, "Hey, I'm not asking God to give me a casino or a porn shop, so he should give me what I want. What I want is good. I want godly kids. I want my husband to treat me as Ephesians 5 says he's supposed to." Well, guess what? We ask amiss, because so often we want something just because it would make our lives more comfortable.

God is not our Sugar Daddy in the Sky. He's not some cosmic Santa Claus looking for ways to make us more comfortable. He is looking for ways to make us more like Christ, so he wants to show how you respond when you don't get your way. Do you love him enough that when your husband isn't an Ephesians 5 husband, you can go on joyfully? Do you love God enough that when your job isn't all you wish it were, you can go on with joy, serving him, pleasing him, and putting in a good day's work at a job that your flesh hates?

Think about it. When do you grow the most—when you've got a husband who's just the way you want him? When do you become more like Christ, and cry out to him in desperate prayer as you search the Scriptures—when your whole world is ordered just the way you want it? No. It's when your husband isn't what you want him to be; it's when the job isn't what you had dreamed of, when your health fails, when your children rebel. That's when God meets you and conforms you to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

IDOLATRY FLIES IN THE FACE OF GOD

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”—Exodus 20:3

Why is idolatry such a big deal? The short answer is that it flies in the face of God. In Matthew 22:37–38, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment.” In Exodus 20:3, God tells us that the number-one commandment is: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” This is foundational.

Now let me give you the definition of an idol:

An idol is anything or anyone that captures our hearts, minds, and affections more than God.

So what could be an idol in your life? Anything. That’s why we’re in such trouble, because absolutely anything can become an idol. Even a good thing, when wanted too much, becomes an idol. The Puritans called such things “inordinate desires.” Idolatry is who or what you worship, what you long for, what your heart is set on. Idolatry is a big deal because it flies in the face of God.

IDOLATRY IS AT THE CENTER OF WHY WE SIN

“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

—Colossians 3:5

Idolatry is a big deal because it infiltrates and takes over the heart—the nerve center—determining the way we sin, when we

sin, with whom we sin. Think of a bicycle wheel. The hub is the heart where the idols are. Each spoke is a specific sin, and you can trace each sin back to the hub—the heart.

In this war against sin, you must not be satisfied to simply stop sinning. As you work with your kids, with yourself, and with your spouse, identifying your heart's idols can help you to understand why you become so irritable, why you raise your voice. Identifying the idols of the heart is when the tide starts to turn. It's not enough to memorize some verses about anger and self-control. Go after the heart! There are heart issues behind all that anger. When someone is in a rage at home or in public, you can be sure that someone *else* has threatened one of his or her idols—and war is about to break out!

Anger, irritability, and verbal outbursts are indicative of heart issues gone awry. When you react to someone else, what is it that you are protecting? What is it that you must have? Husbands, doesn't the Bible say that our wives should respect us? Yes. But if you go around with the old "respect me" chip on your shoulder, constantly telling yourself, "My wife must respect me," you will inevitably be hypervigilant and hypersensitive; you will be perpetually angry, doggedly policing your wife's behavior, because for you, respect is not just something that God commands your wife to do, but something that you think you *must have* in order to be happy.

So many times, the conflicts that you're having can be traced back to your own desires, as we see in James 4:1–3. You think, "I must be respected," or "I must be . . . *whatever*," and it causes war between you and anyone who gets in the way of that desire. Then you cry out to God in prayer, and still don't receive because you ask amiss: "God, change her. God, you know I need respect. God, you know how important that is. Get her, God. You go." But God won't answer a prayer like that. He's more

likely standing there with a two-by-four, wanting to smack you in the head and say, “Shut up and love her—stop worshiping yourself and thinking you are so important.”

Our sin can be traced back to our idols every time. John Piper has summed it up this way: “Sin is what we do when we’re not satisfied in God.” Let me give you a corollary principle that you can use regarding idols. *Sin is what you do when you’re chasing after something other than God, namely, one of your idols.* Idolatry is at center stage of my heart and your heart, because idolatry is nothing more than a metaphor for human craving, yearning, and greedy demands.

That’s what we see in both Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, where Paul is listing sins: “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man . . .” and then he sticks this phrase in there: “. . . who is an idolater . . .” (Eph. 5:5). Paul connects covetousness and idolatry. We normally think, “Fornication . . . don’t want to do that, but covetousness isn’t such a big deal, is it?” But Ephesians 5:5 says “nor covetous man, who is an idolater . . .” When you’re craving something other than God, even something good, God takes it very seriously. In that moment, he’s coming after you. He’s coming after you for his glory and your own good, because life for us is better without idols. Life for us is better when we’re delighting in the gospel and loving Christ as our highest treasure. Life for us is better when we’re focused on God and free from idols.