

Idolatry

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Well 1, thank you for showing up tonight. I was a little nervous that whenever your name is announced ahead of time that you're the one speaking, you kind of worry is anybody going to show up, number 1, and number 2, thank you to Joel because he's given me an hour to speak so I'm really excited about that. I'm just kidding. It's not going to be an hour but I do want to thank Joel for the opportunity to speak to you all tonight and I am really excited about this school year. There's a lot of neat things that we have that are coming up. Number 1, I think I've promoted it a couple of times. We do have an awesome awesome concert coming up. I really feel like we all need those recharge moments in our faith, in our walk with Jesus, and Steve Green is a great catalyst for that. A wonderful humble guy that just sings to the honor and the glory of Yahweh.

Another thing I do want to thank, some of you have been a huge encouragement to my wife and I and to this school through the years, either through your prayers, you've mentioned that to me, either you've taken us out to eat, or you watch our dog. Okay, the St. Johns took our dog this week because my wife and I go up to renew with the students and so it's an awesome opportunity to see how the body of Christ can kind of come in and say, "We want to support what you're doing here," and that is a really huge thing that does not go unnoticed. So I'm very appreciate of that.

I do want to talk about something that's a little heavy just for a minute. I'm really excited about the fact that we do have chapels, we do have Bible class, we do have all these types of things that maybe not typical in a public school arena or anything like that, but one of the most important things is not a Christian curriculum or those things, it would be us living as Jesus would want us to live. So I want to hone in, I think, on something called idolatry and that's kind of a heavy-handed word. It can be a little bit antiquated, that word, but hopefully I'll add some clarity to you guys tonight as we walk through this together.

So here is, I think, a really good starting point when it comes to idolatry: if idolatry is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, the desires is the characteristic in summary of the New Testament word for that same drift. Both are shorthand for the problem of human being. The New Testament merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate life-ruling desires. Idolatry becomes a problem of the heart, a metaphor for human lust, craving, yearning and greedy demand.

It is something we all struggle with so, actually, I'm going to need you guys just for a second to do a quick illustration, okay? So I want you to stand, if you can, for just a minute. All rise, okay. I like doing that, I don't know why. So stand and I want you to close your eyes, now this can become a very dangerous thing for your neighbors, okay? So this can become a very dangerous thing for your neighbors but I want you to close your eyes just for a second. So close your eyes. I will notice if you're cheating. I see some of you. I want you all to point in the direction that north is. North. North, everybody try to point. Some of you, you're processing, you're thinking. North, which direction is north? Okay, everybody open your eyes for just a minute. Leave your hands up just for a second. Okay, look at you guys. You're all over the place. I can tell you this, the only person I saw that is correct is Pastor Joel. North is this way. If you don't know, you need to get your little iPhone out and calibrate it. Okay, you can have a seat, then you can see exactly where north is.

One of the things that I think you and I get caught up in is we need reorientation to the truth of who God is and his word. Most of the time, I would say, we walk through life just like many of you, some of you were pointing in this direction and then when you realized it, you're like, "Okay, I've got to get it right. I'm over here. Yeah, it's over this way." But many of your were pointing in this direction, that direction, some of you pointed up, some of you pointed in other directions. So when it comes to understanding, God gave us a compass for this life. He gave us aid in this matter, it's the word of God. We need reorientation to see things around us the way God wants us to see them.

So somebody tell me this: what is the very very first commandment in the Scriptures of the first Ten Commandments? What is the first commandment? Does anybody want to raise your hand? Are you bold? Yes, sir. That is definitely one of them and that one actually precedes all of them but there's another one. In the Old Testament, what are they? Thou shalt have, what? No other gods before me, which actually if you do that, it takes care of all the other things.

Then the second one is this and I want to illustrate this from the perspective of I've actually seen a little god just like that, a little small "g" god, when I was at the Boston Museum of Art, and they actually have a little Baal there, if you ever go there. They actually have, we're talking over 4,000 years old, this little god that they have on display. Actually, it's right next to a little testimony that is on a cylinder that it's read like this, that Hammurabi was influential in. So we're talking even the Boston Museum of Science is very very much in support, they don't know it, of the word of God.

But the first two commandments in the Old Testament say that, number 1, thou shall have no other gods before me and then, thou shall not make unto thee any graven image. And just as keeping the first commandment was expected to lead to obedience to all the commandments, so idolatry was thought to lead to other sins.

So what is this problem with idolatry? How did it even get here? Did we just invent it? Is it something that was manufactured by the human being? No, it was not. In the beginning when God created perfect order in the garden of Eden, he created us to worship and serve

God and God alone. It was a beautiful communion and all of humanity since then is in this struggle after the fall to try to find things besides God that make us happy. And if you look, really, at the study of humanity, that is what it is, it is all of us trying to find things that seems like other than God to make us happy, then to rule over the created things in God's name. As a tender gardener gardens the beautiful flowers and everything that's in their garden, so we are to care in a tender way all of the things that God has put us in charge to manage. As a manager, you have responsibilities and so when it comes to idolatry, we start to understand that this took place at the fall when all of a sudden this reorganization of our life is really starting to mess us up. At the fall. And so we realize it is a heart issue.

So let's take a look here, if you will. Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 23:33. We are going to be since this more of a theological construct than what you would be used to as far as going through expositionally, we are going to be jumping around a little bit so if you could have your Bible ready, that would be a huge help so that we can get this context and move on.

So why are we supposed to really have an awareness of idols in our life and why is this a danger to us? In Exodus 23, they had just been given, the Israelites had just been given all kinds of information as they are beginning this new life as a group of people that God is saying, "I want you to find land and stay there." But he also gave them a warning, he gave them a warning that, "Even though you are given this, with this freedom that you're having comes a huge responsibility." Huge responsibility and this is going to be the echo of the cyclical motion that Israel is going to be going through for hundreds of years after this. And he says this in Exodus 23:33, "They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

Now, we use this word "idol" in a way that it is indicative of the Old Testament of normally a visible thing that you can see and kind of manipulate and that is what many of them felt like they had to make something that represented some sort of a deity in order to worship this deity. This idea of a snare is a bait or a lure, the deeper reference to the fact that these snares become a way of pulling our heart from the one true God, the way our hearts were made to be.

Now, God was saying that the blessing and the goodness of God will be held back if you ignore this. If you ignore this and you don't view the things that do not align with God's plan, if you don't look at those as a snare, you will become damaged, okay? We all try to seek things that are going to make us happy. We realize that's not it, then we reverse, then we try to find something else and that is the problem with humanity. That's what we see today. We think that somehow some presidential candidate is going to save us from all of the problems in this world. That isn't going to be the answer. The story of the Israelites is very similar to our own problem. They continually tried to find things beside God that would make them happy and therefore ignoring the commandment, and then like us, we wake up and repent and try to set things right.

So as we take a minute to bridge that context into the New Testament, we find Paul is still battling with the issue. It began in Eden at the fall. If you can, turn in Romans 1:22-25, this is a passage that I think Landon had read just a few weeks ago, but this is a beautiful passage that illustrates the fact that we are always battling trying to put ourselves in control of things and a lot of times that's our way of self-medicating issues in our own life, or whatever, but here we find that in Romans 1:22-25, Paul is saying here, "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

You see it today even when it comes to animals. We've created almost this same plane for humanity and animals when God said you're supposed to manage animals. Now we've come up to the place where I heard a father a few months ago saying, "I don't know if it was me or the dog and my daughter was holding us off the cliff, which one she would let go of." It's interesting because we almost have raised animals to be to the point in which in our culture that they are humans and they have feelings and we've created even that in our movies that we're able to see, that they have thought processes like humans. But our foolish hearts were darkened and we worshiped and served created things or things on wheels or things that we walk into called houses, picket fences, the American dream. We've created these things to be the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal.

And also one of the worst things that if we lost it we would feel like our identity was gone. Galatians 4:8-9, I love how Paul illustrates this. So in Galatians 4:8-9 it says, "then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" Number 1, he's saying here they did not know the God of Israel, the true God of the world. And then number 2, the gods that they did know were by nature not gods.

One of the fears of the church that Paul had was that many of the Galatian believers used to worship the Greco-Roman gods, those false deities, and the believers went from – and here was the progression – from idolatry to Christianity to Judaism. Now Paul is saying, "You just jumped over the good one and now what you have done is you've created Judaism to be no different than the false god that you had before," because there's nothing you can do, you can worship all of your good works, you can worship whatever and you can rest in that as your identity but that's not what Paul or God is saying here. God's sovereign grace is the point of this passage. It is him, not us.

Then I love in 1 John 5:20-21, there is this light and dark that is going on in John 5. Evil and good. And in 1 John 5:20-21, John explains how the commands and the love are woven together beautifully and if you look at the Hebrew word for "commands" in the Old Testament it's *hiddur mitzvah*, which is the beautification of the commands. I think one of the things that the world as they view the commandments that God has given to us

and even we as believers can get sucked into this, is that these things that God is warning us from, they're not just commands that just make us into robots. They're beautiful. They are the things that can lead to freedom. When a lot of things you're like, "Oh, you've got to do the rules of Christianity and all this," God is not looking at it that way. He's saying these commands are beautiful. There's something that when God says, "Go away from that idol," it's not like, "Oh, I've got to go away from the idol." No, it's better. There's green pasture on the other side.

John 5:20-21 says this, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." Then he says this, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." It kind of ends weird. There's not this natural flow. But when you start to understand this first part is so crucial to our life, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding." Don't mess with those idols. They will ruin you. But there is beauty in following the one true God.

So how do we know if we have these idols? When our loyalty to something leads us to disobey God. An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero. Did you know an idol can be anything that's good that's twisted? When God says enjoy the fruits of your labor, he says don't enjoy too much of it. Work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibility to one's family is ignored. Work is a good thing. God has created it. It is not something that God cursed us with at the fall. Work was something that was in place before the fall. It's a good thing but when we start to lose the perspective of our family and we don't pour into them truth and goodness as God and as leaders of our families, then guess what? We're going to realize we're off somewhere. We're off somewhere.

So how do we know? Here are four groupings and I like charts because I'm kind of an educator or whatever. I want to walk you through these four different things that I believe are absolutely things that we struggle with that sometimes we may not be 100% sure we struggle with them because they're really easy to mask. It's really easy to mask these things so let's take a look here.

So this would be, the left column as I unfold it will be what we seek. What are those things that we're chasing after? And then this is how you feel, okay? This would be the greatest nightmare others often feel because there is obvious residual effects of sin. And then what's your problem emotions. So let's walk through this real quick together.

What we seek? If power is what you seek, power is what you seek. And it is interesting that we are in the middle of just a horrible year and a quarter here, aren't we, with this election coming up? It's already begun and if we're going to have to go through another year of this, I think it's going to wear down our senses and we're like, "Let's just get this over with." But one of the things that you start to see with certain people, in certain people, is the idea of power. "I want power." Well, what happens? Here is a natural cause of you feeling like, "I want to have power in this world." You will feel burdened because

this isn't the way God planned. Your greatest nightmare is actually humiliation. Others often feel used and then your problem emotion could be anger if you're after power. If you're after power.

This is one that a lot of us struggle with, approval. Most of us like to be liked, right? I don't know of many people that are like, "I just don't care." I know that people say that but I think they care. The goal that they want is they actually want you to think that they don't care so they do care what you think and so, "I don't care what people think of me," or whatever and it's like, "Yeah, that guy's really cool, man," or whatever, but in reality he's probably seeking your approval for that. What you feel is less independence. You're greatest nightmare is rejection. Others often feel smothered and then your problem emotion could be cowardice or you don't like to confront people. This could be as if you are seeking approval.

Did you know approval could be an idol in your life? It could be something that if you don't get it and I love the way I heard one author say this, he said this, "If your emotional core is not affected by praise or by people being critical of you, that is a sign of maturity," which means if people say stuff about you, you're not like, "Yeah, that's right." Or if people are critical of you. Because do you know what? It's okay. Approval.

The next thing is going to be comfort. This is one, these are some that I think sneak in because there is such a fine line. It's not like you have this idol in the middle of your living room that you all go into and you all bow down to it every morning. That would be kind of an obvious idol. What about comfort? You feel reduced productivity. Your greatest nightmare is somebody putting a demand on you or stress. You run from that. Others often can feel hurt. And your problem emotion is you're bored.

Another one could be control. This is one that I think is one that can mask itself as self-discipline or things like that, but you can often feel lonely. You're greatest nightmare is not knowing or uncertainty. Others often feel condemned by you because you kind of have an air of, "I'm better." Then your problem emotion is going to be worry.

These are four things that I think as the Spirit of God lays this on us, you may start to find that some of these things are idols and why are we talking about these? Because you know there is going to be through the period of sanctification as a believer, there's going to be things you may not struggle with. You may not struggle with drugs. You may not struggle with some of those sins that are so obvious to people. But as you start to peel back the onion and dig deeper and push deeper into our own fears and our own struggles, you may have some of these.

One of the things I appreciate about Pastor Joel is the idea of creating community. One of the purposes of this is to allow other believers who have earned the right to speak into you, it could be a spouse, it could be a friend, it could be a small group type of a situation. It's really hard to have people who are in tune with the Spirit of God to pour into you when it's in this environment, when you just come and you sit and then you leave. But when people have actually come together in a group and they are able to pour

truth into each other and be able to say things to you about these things because they know you, they love you. Unsolicited advice from people can do more damage than help. The church doesn't need more policeman walking around or finding out what others have done wrong, but what it needs are faithful friends who pour generous helpings of truth and love into us as believers.

These are ways God allows us to change things we sometimes aren't even aware need to be changed. I heard someone say this once, that when we first became a follower of God, if we were to see where we are supposed to be at full maturity for ourselves, it would be a very very frightening thing, but as God allows us through sanctification to grow, our awareness to love better, it can become a beautiful thing and if people can allow us to be able to open up and to be able to create that type of community is very important for us as believers because one of the most special things that you could ever hear someone say in a small group would be, "You struggle with that too? You too? I thought I was the only one." It is huge because all of you are kind of islands right now and we live with our own fears and our emotions and we have our god of money and all these other different things but when we realize we're not the only ones struggling with this stuff and there have been people in our group that struggled with it that were able to overcome it, what are some of the tools God used in their life to overcome it is beautiful and that is the beauty of us growing together as a group.

So here are some questions to ask. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about the most? So just for a second, what are the things that you worry about the most? What is the thing when you lay your head on your pillow at night that bring you worry? Brings you heaviness? What if I failed or lost it would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? I have often wondered what would I do if I wasn't the principal of South Merrimack Christian Academy? What if somehow I lost my job and I had to go work at McDonald's? I've thought about that. Am I less of a human? Am I less of a one that God loves? I'm not. Five years ago that would have been a very difficult question to answer because I would have wrapped some of my identity into my job. But to be able to be free and independent to say I am who I am because of God, not because of a job, not because of a family, not because of a bank account, but because of God.

What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go badly or become difficult? This is a really difficult question because you and I always go through difficult times and we can go to manipulation and we can go to control when it comes to trying to answer these issues that come up in our life. When we come to the point in our life when you wonder, like, people who become alcoholics or drug addicts or all these different things, those are fruit of a deeper problem of trying to mask issues. You take all those things away, they still have issues they're still trying to deal with. And we are the same way. What do we rely on or comfort ourselves? Is it the presence of God or what is it? What are those things?

What makes me feel my self-worth? What am I the proudest of? What if that was taken away?

Then what do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy? That is a great question to ask yourselves, what would make me happy? If that thing that would make you happy is a thing, you have an idol. If that thing is a thing, you have an idol.

This is a "but God" moment because God does not leave you with just the fact that you're supposed to just try to figure it out and that these idols are bad, stay away from them. This is a moment in which God is here to help us figure this out. So let's take a look here briefly.

The moralizing approach. This would be simple. Your problem is you're going wrong, repent. It's very simple but that's not the total picture of what's supposed to take place.

The next one could be the ?? approach which could be your problem is that you don't see that God loves you as you are. Rejoice. But that's not all there is to it.

There is the Gospel approach and this is when the good news is not just something that you get at salvation, the good news that is poured on us as we walk in life with Jesus, because he says whatever our circumstances, that does not have to be the end. That does not have to be the definition. Just like Jesus had the power to raise from the dead, we can have power to get out of the struggles that we have in our life and we tap into that power as his children. It is awesome. The Gospel approach says this: your problem is that you are looking to something besides Jesus for your happiness. You have been worshiping an idol and rejecting the true God. Repent and rejoice.

So let's take a look at how we do that. So take ownership here. If you would, turn in your Bibles to 2 Chronicles 31:21 and this is a time of King Hezekiah and he was in charge of a distribution of tithe and instead of following his own plan, he chose to honor God with this and so "in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart." One of the things that has to take place, the Holy Spirit has to reveal to you what are these areas that you're trusting in that are apart from who Jesus is. Once that takes place, take it to him with prayer. In your heart, it doesn't even have to be verbal, you could do it in your mind, pray to God. Even a good way to do it, open your palms and say, "God, I'm wrong in this area. Help." Because, why? He did it with all of his heart and so he prospered. This is not just this one way communication. God said, "I will bless you if you walk as I have commanded you."

So name the idols in prayer. The next thing would be to repent of the idols. 2 Chronicles 33:12-13. Manasseh became king at – does anybody know how old Manasseh was when he became the king? Off the top of your head? Anybody? I heard 12. You are absolutely correct, 12 years old. I've struggled with trying to figure this out regarding people in Hollywood, but it seems like when fame, fortune and all that land on somebody so young, it is a recipe for disaster. I almost would say the human machine is not built for fame and fortune and all those types of things because it is such a battleground.

I just read a little article on the man who founded, yeah, I guess he would have founded Minecraft. Have you ever heard of Minecraft? He's a multi-billionaire, billions of dollars. I guess he went on a twitter rant the other day and he was basically saying, "All of this money that I've gotten, I'm still not too happy. I'm still not too happy." He even said this, he said, "All my friends have to work. I have to wait for them to get off of work to play with them," because he's like, "They have jobs and I don't because I have so much money." That could be a very lonely place.

The Bible says that Manasseh did evil in the sight of the Lord. Now, he did so much evil that he actually build idols in the temple. This was a bad dude. God allowed the Assyrians to come in and to imprison him and then 2 Chronicles says this in 33, verses 12 to 13, "Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God."

Here's a good prayer, "Lord, this is a good thing. Why have I made it so absolute? What does it compare to you? If I have you, I don't have this. This cannot love me and help me as you do. This is not my life, Jesus, or you, are my life. This is not my righteousness and worthiness. It cannot give me that but you can and you have."

So not only are we supposed to name and repent, but I think we're also supposed to rejoice. We're supposed to rejoice. Let's turn to Psalm 16 and this is where we'll end. Psalm 16:11, it's a beautiful, beautiful passage if you want to read it, of just celebration. Psalm 16:11, David says this, "You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

So what's your idol? What is that thing that is in your soul that only you maybe even know? Pleasures evermore aren't there with those idols no matter how hard you try to convince yourself. Only true pleasure can come from knowing the one true God and abiding in him. The one that promises sweet pasture and said one of the most beautiful things that I've ever heard in all my life, he says this, "I have come to give you life and to give it to you way more abundantly." Rest in Jesus because all of those other things are there to tear us away from the thing that gives us the worth and that is in Yahweh. That is in God.

Let's close with a word of prayer.

God, thank you for your goodness. I'm humbled that you even allow me to speak. God, you have created us to work with you. Help us to reveal your beautiful image in us more and more as we grow in you. And there are things that beset us, things that are holding us back, you have promised to help us, you have promised that, "All of you who are weary and heavy laden, come to me and I will give you rest." You have promised to take those things from us. Please do that. Help us to name them. Help us to repent. And God, help us to rejoice in your precious Son. You are a good God. You are a competent

Shepherd that loves us well. Help us to see that. Help our minds to wrap around that and focus on it in your Son's precious name, Jesus Christ. Amen.