

Heart Idolatry

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Think for a moment about this question: what one thing should I do to grow more as a Christian? If someone asked you that question, how would you respond? Would you suggest some basic spiritual discipline, such as reading the Bible, praying, finding Christian friends, repenting of sin, or learning theology?

The crowds brought this exact query to Jesus in John 6. His answer may surprise you:

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:28–29)

Notice that they are asking Jesus what they must do to live a life that pleases God. Jesus answers that the work of God is to *believe*. In other words, the Christian life is not about doing, it is about believing. Getting this right is crucial to sanctification. Most of us are naturally "doers." We gladly embrace the next project, the next challenge, the next assignment. So our pursuit of Christian maturity produces a lot of busy effort, but little lasting change. Why is this so? *Because we are doing too much and believing too little.*

You see, our surface sins are only symptoms of a deeper problem. Underneath every external sin is a heart idol—a false god that has eclipsed the true God in our thoughts or affections. To paraphrase Martin Luther, every sin is in some way a breaking of the first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me"). Luther wrote, "As [the First] commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed...so also its work, that is, faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all other [works] must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured." In other words, keeping God primary is foundational to spiritual growth. The key to gospel-driven transformation is learning to repent of the "sin beneath the sin"—the deeply rooted idolatry and unbelief that drive our more visible sins.

As a case study, let's take the surface sin of gossip—talking about people behind their backs in judgmental or destructive ways. Why do we gossip? What are we looking for that we should be finding in God? Here are some common heart idols that can manifest themselves in the surface sin of gossip:

- »» **The idol of approval** (I want the approval of the people I'm talking to)
- »» **The idol of control** (Using gossip as a way to manipulate/control others)
- »» **The idol of reputation** (I want to feel important, so I cut someone else down verbally)
- »» **The idol of success** (Someone is succeeding—and I'm not—so I gossip about him)
- »» **The idol of security** (Talking about others masks my own insecurity)
- »» **The idol of pleasure** (Someone else is enjoying life—and I'm not—so I attack her)
- »» **The idol of knowledge** (Talking about people is a way of showing I know more)
- »» **The idol of recognition** (Talking about others gets people to notice me)
- »» **The idol of respect** (That person disrespected me, so I'm going to disrespect him)

All these idols are false saviors promoting false gospels. Every one of these things—approval, control, reputation, success, security, pleasure, knowledge, recognition, respect—is something we already have in Jesus because of the gospel! But when we are not living in light of the gospel, we turn to these idols to give us what only Jesus can truly give us.

Another way to identify your particular heart idols is to ask *what do I love, trust, or fear?* For example, if I fear being single, “being in a relationship” will probably be my idol (because it promises to deliver me from the “hell” of singleness). If I trust “having enough,” security will probably be my idol (because it promises that I’ll never be without anything). If I love order and structure, control will probably be my idol because if I’m in charge, I can make sure things are in order).

Reflecting on the “sin beneath our sin” shows why the gospel is essential for true heart change. It’s possible to repent of surface sins for a lifetime yet never address the deeper heart issues behind them! At the moment I sin, I have already broken the first commandment. An idol has taken God’s place in my soul. I am trusting in that idol, rather than in God, to be my Savior. I need to apply the gospel by (1) *repenting* of my deep heart idolatry and (2) *believing*—that is, turning my mind toward the specific gospel promises that break the power of my characteristic idols.

According to Dr. Steve Childers, faith “involves learning how to set the affections of our mind and heart on Christ.... Faith requires a continual rehearsing and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours *in Christ*.” Notice the two aspects of faith: setting our affections on Christ and delighting in the privileges that are ours in Christ. I must worship Jesus (not my idols), and I must remind myself of what is really true about me because of Jesus.

Let’s go back again to our example of gossip. Let’s imagine that I have identified *respect* as the dominant idol that drives me to gossip. After I acknowledge my sin and repent of it, I exercise faith in two ways. First, I pause and worship Jesus because he laid aside his right to be respected, becoming humbled to the point of death (Phil. 2:5–11). Second, I remind myself of the gospel truth that I no longer need to crave the respect of others because I have the approval of God through faith in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17–21). Whether people respect me or not is immaterial: God’s grace has freed me from demanding my own respect, and now I live for the fame and honor of Jesus (1 Cor. 10:31).

This exercise is fairly simple in the abstract, but it can be much more difficult when thinking through your own personal patterns of sin. So set aside some intentional time to (1) identify your common surface sins and (2) prayerfully consider what heart idols might lie behind them. Then (3) worship Jesus for his victory over that idol and (4) find specific gospel promises you can rely on to help defeat the power of that idol. Be sure to invite others into your process of reflection and repentance. As one writer has put it, “You can’t see your own face.” We need each other in order to see our sin clearly and deal with it honestly.

As you learn to live a gospel-centered life, remember that this is the essence of walking with Jesus. Repentance and faith are not steps *on* the path; they *are* the path. The work of God is to *believe*.

Personal Reflection

"Romans 1:25 tells us that idols are not sinful things, but **good and basic things elevated into being ultimate things** (v.25 – worshipped... *created things rather than the Creator*) We look to them for meaning in life, for covering our sense of insignificance, for developing a righteousness" or worth.

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, **we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.**

This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong*. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is 'because we are weak and sinful,' but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart. The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a very rare sin only among primitive people). Rather, *the only alternative to true, full faith in the living God is idolatry*. All our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are due at root to idolatry - something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires." – Tim Keller, Gospel Centered Ministry

Answer these diagnostic questions to help you find your heart idols:

- a. What are some reoccurring (surface) sins in my life?
- b. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most or most fear losing?
- c. What do I spend the most time thinking/day-dreaming about? Where does my mind wander?
- d. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- e. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
- f. What do I really want and hope for out of life? What would really make me happy if it happened?

Fill in this chart during your personal reflection time. Heart idols listed in the article: approval, control, reputation, success, security, pleasure, knowledge, recognition, respect (not an exhaustive list).

Heart Idols	Surface Sins	Gospel Truths	Gospel Verse

Group Discussion

- Which one or two are your biggest heart idols?
- How does this heart idol manifest itself in your life? In other words, what surface sins are driven by this idol?
- How do you see your heart idols failing you?
- How does the Gospel actually meet this need? (Refer to examples of Gospel Solutions & fill out the column in your own words)
- What specific Biblical Gospel truths do you need to really believe to combat the idolatries of your heart? (Refer to Gospel Verses Handout and fill out the last column)

Examples of Gospel Solutions

Idol of Control/Security:

My life is not my own. It was bought with a price by a good and Sovereign God who has my best in mind which is ultimately seen through the cross. God's grace has freed me from demanding my own control and now I live for God's plan for my life.

Idol of Success/Achievement:

Without Christ we are undeserving of success. Without Christ we are undeserving anything good. Through Christ we can experience God's goodness and blessing. In the Gospel God defines our purpose of life not as success and achieving much for ourselves, but in making him known and becoming more like Christ. God's grace has freed me from demanding my own success and achievement and now I live for God's for the fame and honor of Jesus.

Idol of Approval/Acceptance/Reputation/Respect/Recognition:

I no longer need to crave the respect of others because I have approval from God through faith in Jesus. Whether people respect me or not is immaterial. God's grace has freed me from demanding my own respect and now I live for the fame and honor of Jesus.

Idol of Pleasure/Comfort:

Our happiness is not a result of our circumstances. We are not entitled to a happy, comfortable, pleasurable life. The gospel redefines our meaning of what brings happiness and pleasure. Regardless of circumstances, we can find ultimate pleasure and comfort through the abundant life bought for us on the cross.

Idol of knowledge:

As believers we are not defined by our intelligence or the amount we know. When God sees us, he sees Christ. He is not concerned with the knowledge of our mind, but the status of our heart.

Examples of Gospel Verses

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. -Romans 8:28

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. -1 Peter 3:18,

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 6:23

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. -2 Corinthians 5:21

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” –Gal 2:20-21

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. -Galatians 5:6

And giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you⁸ to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. -Colossians 1:12-14

¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength. -Philippians 4:11-13

¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. -Phil 2:13

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your⁹ life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. –Colossians 3:3-4

³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. - Philippians 3:3-7

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. –Philippians 3:8-10

⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. -2 Corinthians 12:9-10