

Chapter 6

Discipleship

THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL

What is the greatest threat to the gospel's effectiveness in a Christian life?

Issue Statement

Thesis: It is easy and even typical for Christians to live in the slavery of self-righteousness and lose the power of the gospel in their lives.

All persons long for worth, value, and love which determines what they expect from themselves and others. In a fallen world, alienated from God, humanity is left orphaned to seek worth and love either in things or in people. Thus everyone has a worshipful faith in something or someone from which they derive that value. These things control and disappoint if found and devastate if lost. “You were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.” (Galatians 4:8–9). Every person and every culture sets up idols through which they seek worth and thus their righteousness. Even morality and orthodox religion can become efforts to merit God’s favor, to put Him at debt, and to maintain control over what we most long for. The religious may see Jesus only as an Example or Helper and thus use their religiosity to become their own saviors (cf. Galatians 4:9–11, Galatians 2:21). So in our natural state, the motives for both serving God and for rejecting God can be identical. In both cases we seek to maintain independence from God by denying that we were so sinful that we needed to be saved totally by grace. Instead we seek to earn our own value, our own righteousness. Luther says: “Thereafter the whole world acted like a madman against this faith, inventing innumerable idols and religions with which everyone went his own way, hoping to placate a god or goddess, by his own works; that is, hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins. All this is sufficiently seen in the practices and records of every culture and nation. . . .” What are the gods that rob us of our joy and meaning? How are these gods exposed and their power diminished on our lives?

IDOLATRY: IT’S NATURE AND EFFECTS

A compilation

6.1 PRINCIPLES

In Galatians 5:16–18, Paul tells us:

- I There are two “natures” in every Christian: the “flesh” and the “Spirit” (verses 16,17).** The NIV translates *sarx* or “flesh” as “sinful nature”. The “flesh” in the New Testament, when opposed to the Spirit, does not refer to our physical nature as opposed to our spiritual nature, but the self-desiring aspect of our hearts as opposed to the God-desiring aspect. Our sinful nature was there, naturally, before we were Christians. The Spirit has entered, supernaturally, when we became Christians.
- II To “follow the desires of the flesh” is equated with “living under the law”.** In verse 16, being led by the Spirit is contrasted with the sinful nature, but in verse 18, being led by the Spirit is contrasted with being under law. For Paul, each is just a different way of speaking about the same thing. This tells us not just the actions of the sinful nature (what the sinful nature does—disobeys God) but also the motives of the sinful nature (what the sinful nature most wants—to make up a righteousness apart from God). The sin underneath all sins, the motive for our disobedience is always a lack of trust in God’s grace and goodness and a desire to protect and guard our own lives through self-salvation. Our deep hatred of law leads, ironically, to legalism.
- III Change only begins as we recognize not Just the works, but the particular “over-desires” of our flesh.** This is why Paul in verses 19–23 talks about the works of the flesh and Spirit, but in verses 16–18 talks about the desires. The word Paul uses for “desires” is *epithumia* which literally means an “over-desire”, an inordinate, all-consuming drive. To begin real changes in our lives, we cannot just understand one’s “characteristic flesh”. We have to ask ourselves not just what we do wrong, but why we do it wrong. We disobey God in order to get something we feel we have to have. That’s an “over-desire” (*epithumia*). Why do we have to have it? It is something we have come to believe will authenticate us. In Galatians 4: 3, 8–9, Paul makes reference to how works-righteousness leads us to make elementary and basic things into “gods” which are no gods at all. So we have to discover our idols, our characteristic “flesh” patterns.
- IV Change only arrives when we specifically replace what our flesh sees and longs for with what the Spirit sees and desires.** Verse 25 literally says we must “keep in step” with the Spirit. The Spirit is a living person, who glories in and magnifies the work of Jesus. But we must specifically find the particular false beliefs of our flesh which generate the “over-desires” and lead us to sin.

6.2 IDENTIFYING OUR PERSONAL IDOLATRY

Introduction:

In the book of Romans, Paul has been developing a profound “anatomy of sin”. He shows us that sin goes much deeper than mere behavioral violations. Sin begins at the motivational level, and thus, in Romans 8, he will show that sin cannot simply be resisted at the volitional level through mere will-power, but must primarily be rooted out at the motivational level through the application of gospel-truth by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of “sonship” (Romans 8:12–16) In Romans chapters 1–7, Paul shows what sin is and how it operates deep under the surface of our lives. In this study we will “collect” his teaching on this topic and combine it with other material to get a total picture. To summarize Paul’s teaching:

- I Our root problem is our unwillingness to glorify God, to give him the centrality which is his due. (Romans 1:21, “for though they knew God, they neither glorified Him nor gave thanks to Him”).
- II Therefore, we substitute created things as “gods”. In order to deny God control of our lives, each of us chooses a created thing or things to live for and worship instead. (Romans 1:25, “worshipped . . . created things rather than the Creator”.) We all must worship something.
- III Therefore, each life is distorted by a life-lie. At the core of our lives all our choices, our emotional structure, our personality is a false belief system centered on an idol: that something besides God can give us the life and joy that only God can give. (Romans 1:25, “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie”. Romans 1:21, “but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened”.) We look to something besides Jesus to be our “savior”, our “righteousness”, that which makes us good and acceptable.
- IV Our life-lie brings us under bondage. No one is actually “free” for whatever we give ourselves to, we must serve. (Romans 1:25, “worshipped and served created things”). Since every human being must have an ultimate “good” by which all other choices are made and values are judged, we all “offer ourselves” up to something (Romans 6:16). Therefore every human being is in “covenant service” to a “lord” which works its will out through our bodies (Romans 6:16–19).
- V Even after conversion, our old false saviors/lords and their attendant false belief systems still distort our lives unless the power of the Holy Spirit continually renews our minds and hearts (Romans 7:14–25).
- VI The key to freedom is the application of the gospel of grace (Romans 6:14, “Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace”).

6.3 WHAT GREAT CHRISTIANS HAVE SAID ABOUT IDOLATRY

6.3.1 The primacy of idolatry

The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry. . . . (All murder and adultery, for example, are idolatry for they arise because something is loved more than God. Yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God). Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry.

—Tertullian, *On idolatry*, Chapter 1

The virtues on which the mind preens itself as giving control over to the body and its urges, and which aim at any other purpose or possession than God, are in point of fact vices rather than virtues.

—Augustine, *City of God*, Chapter 19:25

A careful reading of the Old and New Testaments shows that idolatry is nothing like the crude, simplistic picture that springs to mind of an idol sculpture in some distant country. As the main category to describe unbelief, the idea is highly sophisticated, drawing together the complexities of motivation in individual psychology, the social environment, and also

the unseen world. Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds (Ezekiel 14). The apostle associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life . . . it is found on center Stage.

—Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in *No God but God*

The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry. But let me focus the question through a particular verse in the New Testament. . . ‘Beloved, keep yourselves from idol’ (1 John 5:21). How does that command merit being the final word in a 105 verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God? Keeping oneself from idols sums up what vital fellowship with Jesus is. . . .

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

6.3.2 Defining idolatry

“[Each] person acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chief good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts. . . . All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like. . . . When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main idol] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets which bring supply. . . . This is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man. . . .”

—Stephen Chamock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*

“Sin predisposes us to want to be independent of God, to be laws unto ourselves or autonomous, so that we can do what we want without bowing to His authority. At the most basic level, idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world—if we do not want to face the fact of God Himself in his majesty and holiness. Rather than look to the Creator and have to deal with his lordship, we orient our lives toward the creation, where we can be more free to control and shape our lives in our desired directions. . . . Since we were made to relate to God, but do not want to face Him [and let him control and shape us], thus we forever inflate things in the world to religious proportions to fill the vacuum left by God’s exclusion. . . . We do not just eliminate God, but we erect God-substitutes in his place.”

—Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in *No God but God*

- I Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living. A value is anything good in the created order—any idea, relation, object or person in which one has an interest, from which one derives significance. . . .
- II These values compete. . . . In time, one is prone to choose a center of value by which other values are judged. . . [which] comes to exercise power or preeminence over other values.
- III When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen. . . a god. . . . One has a god when a finite value is . . . viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully. (To be worshipped as a god, something must be sufficiently good. . . , were my daughter not a source of exceptional affection and delight, she would not be a potential idolatry for me, but I

am tempted to adore her in a way. . . disproportional.)

—Thomas C. Oden, *Notes on the Death of Modernity*, Chapter 6

6.3.3 The Biblical theology of idolatry

“At the end of Exodus 20:23, the Lord says. . . “You shall make no covenant with them [pagan people] or with their gods”

[Paul says] unbelievers “worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Man cannot escape his covenantal nature . . . worship and service are inseparable. . . . We must worship something—so we must serve something. No more explicit statement of man’s allegiance to his idols could be made. . . . Paul describes the unbeliever as one in slavery to sin (Romans 6:1–6). . . false service or slavery is thought of as emerging from a covenant with false gods.

The warning against making a covenant with a false god presumes a comparison with the true covenant. . . in the Sinatic covenant of Exodus 20 there is (a) The command to love: Exodus 20.3 demands: “Thou shall have no other gods before me ”. . . (b) The sanctions: Exodus 20 promises blessings or curses depending on our response to the covenant. . .

Now unbelief is an expression of a covenant with idols. . . All sin involves idolatry in one way or another, although it may not be immediately obvious. Sin does not occur in a vacuum. Despite our inability to fathom the depth of sin, we can describe it more accurately once we recognize our covenantal nature. One’s life as an unbeliever is organized around idolatry. . . Any theory of [human nature] which discusses the “why” aspect of behavior wrestles with the question of motivation. What is a person really after? Why is he really after it? A covenant servant expects blessings and avoids curses [by serving his god]. Without rooting our view of human nature in the covenant, we will not be able to adequately describe human motivation. We will only see a collection of desires rather than an expression of a comprehensive covenant.”

—Michael W. Bobick, *From Slavery to Sonship: A Biblical Psychology for Pastoral Counseling*

Idols of the heart are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1–8. . . . If “idolatry” is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then “lust” [inordinate desires], epithumia, is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (Galatians 5:16ff; Ephesians 2:3,4.22; 1 Peter 2:11,4:2; 1 John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where epithumia is the catch-all for what is wrong with us). The tenth commandment [against coveting, which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]. . . also . . . makes sin psychodynamic. It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7 . . . the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires . . . for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed “idolatry” (Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5).”

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

6.3.4 Discerning Idolatry

“An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as a substitute for God. All sorts of things are potential idols. . . . 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 . . . if this is so, how do we determine when something is an idol?”

I As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol. . . .

- Work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one's family are ignored.
- Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside one's own family is cared for.
- Being well-liked, a perfectly legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means one never risk disapproval.

2. [Idols] are inflated. . . suggesting that the idol will fulfill the promises for the good life. . . . Idols tend to come in pairs—for example a nearby idol may be a rising standard of living, but the faraway idol is a semi-conscious belief that material success will wipe away every tear. . . .”

—Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in *No God but God*

“. . . that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: has something or someone, besides Jesus the Christ, taken title to your heart's functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?

Questions . . . bring some people's idol systems to the surface. “To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect out of life? What would really make you happy? Where do you look for power and success? These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors.

[This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible's conceptualization, the motivational question is the lordship question: who or what “rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?”

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

6.3.5 The effects of idolatry

I General effects

“The idol begins as a means of power, enabling us to control, but then overpowers, controlling us”

—Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in *No God but God*

II Cognitive effects: “the delusional field”

”[Your] idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. They spin out a whole false belief system. They establish a focus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g. lust for money), other people (e.g. “I need to please my father”) or myself (e.g. attainment of personal goals). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of value and stigma. Idols promise blessings and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail [their standards]. “If I [make enough money], I will be secure. If I can get these certain people to like and respect me, then my life will be valid.”

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

III Emotional and behavioral effects: “bondage”

- *Anxiety idolatry and the future*

Anxiety becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values. . . . Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths.

- *Guilt idolatry and the past*

Guilt becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values. . . . Suppose I value my ability to teach and communicate clearly. . . . If clear communication has become an absolute value for me, a center of value that makes all my other values valuable . . . then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt.

- *Bitterness*

Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value. . . .

- *Boredom/emptiness*

To be bored is to feel empty [meaningless]. Boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries . . . [when any of those values are lost] boredom becomes pathological and compulsive. . . . My subjectivity experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos. . . . This picture of the self is called despair.” [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism]

—Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia*, Chapter 6

“The things frequently labeled ‘co-dependency’ are more precisely instances of ‘co-idolatry’. People’s typical idol patterns often reinforce each other and fit in an uncanny way into a [single,large] idol system, creating massively destructive feedback loops. The classic alcoholic husband and rescuing wife are enslaved within an idol system whose components complement each other all too well.

The idol pattern in the husband . . . might be a use of alcohol (a) to serve an idol of escape from the pains and frustrations in life, or (b) to serve an idol of self-crucifixion to deal with his periodic guilt and remorse. The idol pattern in the wife. . . might be a use of rescuing behavior (a) to serve an idol of personal worth by being a martyred savior of her family or (b) to serve an idol of security by having a male’s love and dependence on her.

Each of their idols (and consequent behavior, thoughts, and emotions) is logical within the idol system. . . . Idols counterfeit aspects of God’s identity and character. . . judge, savior, source of blessing, sin-bearer, object of trust. . . Each idol in the system “makes promises” and “gives warnings”. Service to each idol results in a hangover of misery and accusedness, because idols lie and murder. They are continually insinuated by the one who as a liar and murdered from the beginning.”

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

6.3.6 Healing idolatry with the gospel

“Before you can [know you are at peace with God], you must not only be troubled for your sins of your life, but also for the sins of your best duties and performances. . . . Before you can be at peace with God, there must be a deep conviction before you can be brought out

of your self-righteousness; it is the last idol taken out of our heart. The pride of our heart will not let us submit to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. But if you never felt that you had no righteousness of your own, if you never felt the deficiency of your own righteousness you cannot come to Jesus Christ.”

—George Whitefield, *The Method of Grace*

“If we accurately comprehend the interweaving of . . . behavior, deceptive inner motives, and powerful external forces, then . . . what was once “dry doctrine” becomes filled with appeal, hope, delight and life. People see that the Gospel is far richer than a ticket to heaven and rote forgiveness for oft-repeated behavioral sins. . . .

We . . . frequently do not get the Gospel straight and applicable. I will consider two [mistaken] tendencies—psychologizing and spiritualizing.

I A psychologizing approach says you feel horribly and act badly because your needs aren’t being met—because your family did not meet them. . . . Then it says “God accepts you just as you are.” This is not the Biblical gospel, however. . . . The Gospel is better than unconditional love. It says, “God accepts you just as Christ is.” God has contra conditional love for you. Christ is fully pleasing to the Father and gives you his own perfect goodness. God never accepts me as-I-am; he accepts me as-I-am-in-Christ. The center of gravity is different. The true Gospel does not allow God’s love to be sucked into the vortex of my soul’s idolatrous systems. This approach just soothes the unhappy soul without getting to the source of the pain.

II In a moralizing approach. Christ’s forgiveness is applied simply to behavioral sins. The solution is typically construed in all-or-nothing terms: “Let go and let God”, or repent for these behaviors in total yieldedness; attempt to deal with the motive problems with a single act of housecleaning. There is little sense of patient process of inner renewal. . . . dying to the false gods we fabricate. -David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

“The faith that . . . is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness. . . . It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others. . . . But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. Here is a sense in which the strongest self-love that we can have . . . is merely the mirror image of the lively conviction we have that God loves us.

Moralism, whether it takes the form of either denunciation or “pep talks”, can ultimately only create an awareness of sin and guilt or manufactured virtues built on will-power. . . . We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christians life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace. . . .

Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons—much less secure than non-Christians, because they have too much light to rest easily under the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own achievements and righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races [idolizing their own culture] to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches of the tree of sin grow out of this fundamental insecurity [the rejection of the righteousness of Christ].

—Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*

“Co-dependency literature often perceptively describes the patterns of dysfunctional idols which curse and enslave people (e.g. the rescuer or compulsive drinker). But the solution [in this same literature] is to offer different and presumably more workable idols, rather than the Bible’s Christ . . . self-esteem. . . acceptance and love from new significant others, [better jobs and careers] create successful versions of the idols ‘fear of man’ and ‘trust of man’. Functional idols do ‘work’ and ‘bless’ with temporarily happy lives (Psalm 73) . . . but the idol system is intact. . . .”

—David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

SUMMARY:

(This is based on Genesis 3 and on my readings and quotes based above. Compare this with the summary of what Paul says in Romans, outlined in the introduction.)

- Step #1 **Pride.** Sin is to seek to be God—self-existent and sovereign over himself. Sin is a desire to create a secure, independent life apart from God. An unwillingness to trust God, to admit we are creatures dependent on Him.
Text: Genesis 3:5—“you will be like God”.
- Step #2 **Fear.** Sin-pride leads to a pervasive awareness of our weakness and guilt. Thus there’s a drive to get both control and worth, while hiding from God, self and others.
Text: Genesis 3:10—“I was afraid . . . so I hid”
- Step #3 **The Lie.** Sin-anxiety moves us to construct an idol-based belief system by which we seek both power and worth as independent from God. We trust our idols more than God. The idol system distorts the way we perceive ourselves, success and failure. God, the world, and others.
Text: Genesis 3:12—“You will not die . . . when you eat it your eyes will be opened.”
- Step #4 **Self-justification.** The life-lie leads to a life of pleasing the idol(s): choices and behavior coherently designed to seek to seek its blessings and avoid its curses. All idol systems are essential “works-righteousness” with its own set of standards and laws.
Text: Genesis 3:7—“they . . . made coverings for themselves”
- Step #5 **Lusts.** Because we give idols power to justify us, we must have them, creating deep inordinate drives and desires that master us and can’t be controlled. Our idols control us by capturing our imagination in the form of vivid, positive pictures of certain conditions we believe will make us happy and fulfilled.
Text: Genesis 3:16—“your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

Step #6 **Varied miseries.** Depending on how our circumstances are and how our self-justifying efforts go, our pain will differ. If someone or something blocks us from getting what we want, there is anger and scapegoating. If some condition threatens our idols there is deep fear and anxiety. If we fail our idol significantly, there is despair and self-hatred or guilt. If we please our idol fairly successfully, there is still emptiness and boredom.

6.4 DISMANTLING YOUR IDOLS

6.4.1 Unmask your idols.

We must remember that idols create a “delusional field” about them. We have deified them. We have created a cognitive and emotional inflation of them. Remember that we have magnified them in our eyes to be more wonderful and all-powerful than they are. Most of all, realize and remind yourself of what you are saying to God when you pine after idols (in your anger, fear, despondency). You are saying something like this: “Lord, it’s good to have you, but there’s this other thing that I must have or life is not happy or meaningful. If I can’t have it, I will despair. You are not enough. I need this, too, as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take it from me, I’d turn my back on you, for you are negotiable but this is not! This is the real goal of my life—if you are useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you.” It is important to see what you are really saying and recognize both the unreasonableness of it and the cruelty of it. We need to see how ungrateful we are being to Jesus. And we need to see how, at bottom, this is another way of avoiding Jesus as Savior, and trying to be our own.

6.4.2 Repent of this “sin beneath all the sins”. You must do it in two stages:

a. Hating the sin/or itself. “Lord I see how repulsive this idol is. Lord, the thing itself is not what is evil—it is what my heart has done to it—elevating it—that makes it evil. I refuse to be controlled by it any longer. It wreaks havoc in my life. You justify me, not this. You are my master, not this. I will not be controlled by this. This is not my life (I don’t have to have it), but CHRIST is my life (I only have to have him.)” b. Rejoicing in the grace and work of Jesus. “Lord, I have been trying to earn my own salvation and weave my own righteousness. But you are my salvation and righteousness. I am accepted in your Son! All my problems come because I am forgetting how loved, honored, beautiful, secure, rich, respected, embraced, free in Jesus. And all other ways of finding honor, etc. are vain. Let me be so ravished with your love of me that no other love can control me.”

Meditate on this poem by John Donne. Make it a prayer —

Take me to you, imprison me.
For I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

6.5 ADDENDUM: APPROACHES IN DEALING WITH IDOLATRY

I The “Moralizing” approach says: Your problem is that you are sinning here and here. Repent!

This focuses on behavior—but doesn’t go deep enough. We must find out the why of behavior—what inordinate desires are working and the idols and false beliefs behind them. To simply tell an unhappy person to “repent and change behavior” won’t help because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, “even if you live up to moral standards, if you don’t have this you are still a failure.” You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all—your particular idolatry.

II “Psychologizing” approach says: Your problem is that you don’t see that God loves you as you are.

This focuses on feelings—but doesn’t go deep enough. We must find out the reason a person doesn’t feel happy or loved—what inordinate desires are working and the idols and false beliefs behind them. To simply tell an unhappy person, “God loves you” won’t help because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, even if God loves you, since you don’t have this you are still a failure. You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all—our particular idolatry.

III “Gospel application” approach says: Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ to be your happiness.

This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Repentance for rejecting Christ’s free grace and acceptance is a sorrowful yet joyful act. Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law. Every idol is the center of some system of works-righteousness by which we are seeking to “earn” our salvation by pleasing the idol. Every idol-system is a way to be “under the law”. Only when we realize we are righteous in Christ is the idol’s power over us broken. Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14) To live and think of yourself as “under grace” means that no created thing can now master or control you. You can enjoy them.

6.5.1 Worksheet — Identifying Our Idols

I Examine examples of idol-based “life-lies” and mark those to which you seem most prone.

Power idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I have power and influence over others.

Approval idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I am loved and respected by

Comfort idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life.”

Image idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I have a particular kind of look or body image.

Control idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of.

Helping idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—people are dependent on me and need me.”

- [] Dependence idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.”
- [] Independence idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.”
- [] Work idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I am highly productive getting a lot done.”
- [] Achievement idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if-I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career.”
- [] Materialism idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if-I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.
- [] Religion idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—I am adhering to my religion’s moral codes and accomplished in it activities.”
- [] Individual person idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if- this person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me.”
- [] Irreligion idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if-I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality.
- [] Racial/cultural idolatry-. Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.”
- [] Inner-ring idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if-a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.”
- [] Family idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me.”
- [] Relationship idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—Mr. or MS. 'Right' is in love with me.”
- [] Suffering idolatry: Life only has meaning /” only have worth if—I am hurting, in a problem—only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt.”
- [] Ideology idolatry: Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power.

II Examine yourself when you are experiencing negative emotions. Find the possible idolatrous sources. Fill in your answers below.

- 1 If you are angry. Ask: Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry—because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?
Write down what that might be:

- 2 If you are fearful or badly worried:. Ask: Is there something too important to me? something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared—because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?”
Write down what that might be:

3 If you are despondent or hating yourself. Ask: Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so down? –because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?

Write down what that might be:

III Use diagnostic questions:

1 What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?

2 What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?

3 What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?

4 What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?

5 What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?

6 What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?

7 What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

IV Answer the questions above and then look for common themes. Write below what you think are your “functional” masters. What things tend to be *too* important to you?

6.6 APPENDIX NO. 6 — DISCOVERING IDOLS PROJECT

Our failure in discovering our personal idolatry often stems from failure to go deep enough in our analysis. For example, money is a very prevalent idol, yet money may not be the deeper idolatry but merely a means of attaining what at root the heart holds on to. Some people, for instance, want lots of money in order to control their world and life, while others want lots of money for access to social circles, others for making themselves beautiful and attractive. The same goes for sex. Some people use sex in order to get power over others in order to feel approved and loved and others just for pleasure or comfort. The following chart may be helpful in analyzing our idolatries.

What we seek	Price we are willing to pay	Greatest nightmare	Others feel	Problem emotion
<i>Comfort</i>	Reduced productivity	Stress/ demands	Hurt/ Anger	Boredom
<i>Approval</i>	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
<i>Control</i>	Loneliness/ spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
<i>Power</i>	Burdened/ responsible	Humiliation	Used	Anger

I Work the above chart from right to left. First check out your dominant emotional state. Which of the four major emotions do you see as a pattern in your life. Then work back to the idolatry that controls it.

II Study the above chart carefully and answer the following questions:

- What does it tell you about your idolatrous heart?
- What does idolatry do to our relationships?
- What does idolatry do to our emotions?
- What is the price idolatry exacts of us?
- How does it enslave us?