



Idols We Never Knew We Had

A 19-Minute Bible Study

(with extra content to expand each lesson to 45 minutes)

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Leader's Guide

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LESSON 1

IDOLS WE NEVER KNEW WE HAD— ARE WE REALLY IDOLATERS?

We all worship. We all worship something or someone every day. Functionally, these are our gods.

While many people consider idolatry to be the primitive practice of ancient Near Eastern cultures or even of present-day tribal peoples, the reality is that idolatry is as much or more an issue today in the Western world as it has ever been in any corner of the planet. In fact, one could argue that the idolatry practiced today in the United States is more embarrassing and more dangerous than bowing down to little carved images because we don't even realize we're guilty of it.

Dr. Timothy Keller, known for his insights on idolatry, has said that an idol is created when you take a good thing and make it the ultimate thing in your life. He writes, ***“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”***¹ Years before Keller, Martin Luther made a similar comment about idolatry when he said, ***“Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.”***² Another reformer, John Calvin, said, ***“The human heart is an idol factory. . . . Every one of us from our mother’s womb is an expert in inventing idols.”***³

Keller, Luther, and Calvin all have a clear consensus about idolatry because really they are only echoing sentiments that we find in the biblical text.⁴ Ezekiel perhaps said it best.

Ezekiel 14:1-5

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. Then the word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. xvii.

² Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, p. 44. Similar thoughts are also expressed in his *Treatise on Good Works*.

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Religion* (1.11).

⁴ Many additional present-day authors have captured a very similar definition of idolatry. Further examples are provided at the end of this lesson.

When any of the Israelites set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling block before their faces and then go to a prophet, I the LORD will answer them myself in keeping with their great idolatry. I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.”

Note: Ezekiel’s work as a prophet took place in the early years of Judah’s Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel was an exile ministering to exiles.

1. God had promised Abraham that God would bless the Jews and give them the land of Canaan (see Genesis 17:7-9). How had the Israelites ended up displaced and in captivity?

Through their idolatry—a constant turning away from the true God for the pagan Canaanite gods—the Lord allowed them to fall into the hands of Babylonian captors.

2. The Israelites struggled with idol worship from the moment God told them not to worship idols (see Exodus 20:1-6; Exodus 32). Worship to the baals and Ashtoreth and Asherah were pet sins. But God doesn’t mention the “high places” of such idols in the Ezekiel text. Where are the idols mentioned in Ezekiel set up? What then is God suggesting about idolatry with this imagery?

Hearts. While idol worship often contains outward customs, idol worship begins in a corrupted heart, that is, in a heart that desires a created thing more than the Creator-God.

3. In the First Commandment, God tells us, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). While this certainly means that we are to have no other gods period, what does it also tell us about the pecking order of our lives?

Idolatry is a lot about priorities. Idolatry is not, in other words, merely a matter of loving or not loving God. If we love the true God, but have a higher allegiance

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to something other than the true God, we are still idolaters. Idolatry is about loving something MORE than God.

4. How does Ezekiel 14:4 support that idea? What is the link between our attention and the main priorities of our hearts?

We're told the Israelites had "a wicked stumbling block before their faces," and this is the explanation of setting up "idols in their hearts." Your attention is wherever your face is turned. The Israelites clearly had been turning their faces toward something/someone other than their Savior-God. Whatever grabs our attention ahead of the true God is an idol.

5. Since idolatry is a bad thing, we might be inclined to think that idolatry is primarily a love of bad things. Saint Augustine (and later Dante), however, made the case that the sin of idolatry is not so much in loving bad things but in loving good things *too much*, that is, disordered love. What are some examples of "good things" that many people, including Christians, perhaps love too much?

Answers will vary. Good examples could be money, career, success, family, romance, social approval, moral performance, etc. Let students know that we will be looking at many of these topics in depth in the weeks to come.

6. Some of the greatest minds in the history of the Christian faith have suggested that idolatry is the reason for all the wrong we ever do. Every sin, then, is first and foremost a violation of the First Commandment—the one overarching command of God. And the last of the commandments bookends this idea. In other words, the first of the commands tells us not to have other gods and the last of the commands tells us not to desire anything as though it were God (that is, "covet"). If we do, what will

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our behavior look like? (Hint: Consider the middle commandments.) Give some examples of how this plays out in our lives.

The First Commandment says we are to have no other gods. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments tell us we are not to desire anything as though it were God. If we do, we will worship our false gods by breaking the true God's Second through Eighth Commandments.

For instance, if money is the thing I desire as my god, I may worship that false god by breaking the true God's Seventh Commandment through dishonest business practices, cheating on my taxes, lying about my work hours, or just flat out stealing something.

If pleasure is the thing I desire as my god, I may worship that false god by breaking the true God's Sixth Commandment through extramarital sex.

If social approval is the thing I desire as my god, I may worship that false god by breaking the true God's Eighth Commandment through slandering others in order to try to make myself look better by comparison.

If my child is the thing I desire as my god, I may worship that false god by breaking the true God's Fourth Commandment through failing to parent correctly, not teaching respect or discipline.

The list is endless.

7. Jesus is the only person who never committed idolatry. Yet, to rescue us from our idolatry, he made himself a sacrifice to the true God. What, then, is the only way we can overcome our idolatry?

We repent of our love for created things ahead of our love for our Creator-God. We turn to Christ Jesus for full and free forgiveness. And we start seeing our Savior as more beautiful than our idols. Read Colossians 3:1-5 for encouragement.

Colossians 3:1-5

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above,

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not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

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BONUS MATERIAL

1. Are you having trouble thinking of what your personal, secret idols may be? Remember, an idol is something other than God to which you ascribe nearly ultimate value. Spend the next 10 minutes carefully thinking through the following questions that will help you discover your idols:

- What do you daydream about?
- What do you have nightmares about?
- What do you go to bed thinking about?
- What do you wake up in the morning thinking about?
- What exists in your life to which you freely and effortlessly give your time, your energy, your emotion, your thoughts, and your money?
- What experiences in life make you feel as though time flies by?
- What in life causes you the greatest outpouring of emotion?
- What is the thing in life that makes you think, "If I had this, then my life would finally be right"?
- What is the thing in life that makes you think, "If I lost this, my life would mean nothing and I'd rather die"?

If the answer to each of these questions is something other than "Jesus," then you *might* have an idolatrous relationship. Remember, these questions are merely pointers.

Why do you think the items you listed are so important to you?

Answers will vary, but, ultimately, we overvalue these things because deep down we believe that they will provide us with the satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy that only Jesus himself can deliver.

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Read Romans 1:21-32.

2. Three times we're told "God gave them over" (vv. 24,26,28) to their sinful ways. Why would a loving God allow people to veer so far away from his intention for their lives?

This boils down to a balance of the freedom that God offers humanity. If he forces our love or behavior, then we are merely robots and our obedience reflects no love or gratitude to him. God created us to exist in a relationship with him, and relationships are only loving if the choices are free.

3. Paul claims here that all humanity inherently knows God exists (vv. 21,22). What is the reason, then, why so many in the world deny God's existence? In other words, what is the convenient reason why people would not want to believe in God? How does this fit together with idolatry—the practice of ascribing ultimate value to someone or something other than the true God?

Many in the world don't want to acknowledge the true God's existence because that would mean they are responsible to this God. They have to answer to this God. They have to seek his will and become obedient to this God's commands. Sin leads us to want to be on the top of the totem pole. If God is not there, then humanity is free to do whatever it wants.

This thought meshes with idolatry because even though some claim no belief in God, everyone ascribes ultimate value to someone or something. This is because God created us to exist in a relationship with him, our God. Therefore, even though many deny the true God, they assign something to the "god" position in their lives.

4. Earlier in the lesson (Question 6), we established that all sin is a form of idolatry and that when we fail to worship the true God and desire something else as though it were God, we worship our false god by breaking the true God's commandments (all the middle commandments). How do verses 29-31 support this idea? What commandments are being broken by those who deny the true God?

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While there is obviously some overlap, we see these commandments being broken: Second Commandment—God-haters; Fourth Commandment—insolent, arrogant, disobey their parents; Fifth Commandment—no love, no mercy, murder, strife; Sixth Commandment—no fidelity; Seventh Commandment—deceit; Eighth Commandment—gossips, slanderers, boastful; Ninth and Tenth Commandments—envy, malice. The leader could ask participants to name the sin and match it up with what commandment is being broken.

Reread Colossians 3:1-5.

5. Verse 5 tells us, “Put to death . . . greed, which is idolatry.” The word translated as “greed” here is a word for “covetousness,” a continual want for more from this life. Paul says *that* is idolatry. Now note the sins listed prior to greed in this list. Remember what we’ve said about the relationship between the first, last, and middle commandments. How does this verse support that thought?

Again we see that the overarching sin is idolatry—desiring something as though it were God—and all other sins are a way of worshiping some earthly thing to which we have ascribed too much value. In this particular verse, sex is clearly being overvalued.

6. According to verses 1 and 2, how do we overcome this disproportionate love for earthly things? In practical terms, what would this look like?

When our hearts are lusting after earthly things, we need to repent and turn our hearts toward “things above.” According to verse 2, that happens when we focus our minds on the life beyond this one, the life won for us by Christ, and not on this life. Practically, repenting of idolatry and fixing our eyes on things above means sacrificing our idols, being intentionally willing to compromise the earthly adulation and comfort that idols might provide. By focusing on the beauty of Jesus and his saving work, only then will we become willing to set aside the beauty of created things.

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Further Insights Into Idolatry From Present-Day Scholars

Option: As leader, read through the following quotes out loud. Instruct each of the participants to underline a phrase from each of the quotes that they think brings out the point of today's lesson. The participants can underline while the leader is reading the quote. With a person next to them or in a group of 3 to 4 people (leader decides), have them share their choices and why they selected those phrases. The leader can say, "After two minutes, we'll hear a sample from each group."

"... whatever your heart clings to or relies on for ultimate security. The idol is whatever claims the loyalty that belongs to God alone. ... Israel's reliance on idols in Jesus' day did not take the form of bowing down to images, nevertheless, they did put their trust in something else besides God, bringing judgment on themselves."⁵

"Anything that becomes the purpose or driving force of your life probably points back to idolatry of some kind."⁶

"A typical extension of the notion of worship and the idea of deification is the position that considers granting ultimate value to someone or something which is not worthy of a form of false worship. Granting ultimate value does not necessarily mean attributing a set of metaphysical divine attributes; the act of granting ultimate value involves a life of full devotion and ultimate commitment to something or to someone. Absolute value can be conferred upon many things—institutions such as the state, persons, goals, ideologies, and even a football team. In this extension of worship, religious attitude is perceived not as part of a metaphysics or as an expression of customary rituals but as a form of absolute devotion, an attitude that makes something into a godlike being. ... It is not easy to draw the exact line between attributing value and conferring absolute value, between not being indifferent and leading a life of total devotion, but when that line is crossed an idol is erected and an idolatrous life is being led."⁷

⁵ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pp. 17, 162.

⁶ Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War*, p. 26.

⁷ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, pp. 245,246.

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