

TAKEAWAY

Inside / Outside / Upside Down
Part 4 - Idolatry

September 27, 2009

From the Heart

I have high standards—for myself and for others, although I'm much sterner on myself. I tend to see things in a very black and white manner. Fortunately as I've gotten older, I've learned there are many gray areas, which has allowed me to be more of a grace-giver. In the past, I have struggled with some pretty clear-cut idols, i.e., music, my job, a relationship. I found it more difficult to think of a current idol in my life until I realized...it's my standards. If an idol is something that I look to for my identity and/or self-worth, then I may have a problem. My standards are biblical—they line up with the Word almost every time. But I sometimes measure myself and others against them, rather than the One who inspired my standards in the first place—God. I'm still searching for what God wants me to do with this. Another thing I'm struggling with is that my standards need to be used in many positions in my life. My jobs require me to use my standards, and even my friends seek what I think about issues in their lives. But somewhere, deep inside, I can't escape the knowledge that my standards have become my idol.

My journey has led me to pray this prayer: "God, show me what You want me to do with this. I can't escape knowing this is what You are saying, but I also don't know what to do. I don't know where to draw the line or how to move my standards (which line up with your Word) to a place that is under You. I'm confused. So, please clear up the fog and show me how to better honor You. I am open to what You want to say and how You want to change me in this."

Heart Disease

Since we were created to be worshipers, we can make anything an idol. We can marginalize God with knowledge, truth, theology, art, music, TV, technology, cars, athletics, houses, food, or celebrities. Or it might be our abilities, health, appearance, identity, family, friends, power, possessions, popularity, entertainment, type of church, career, status, time, schedule, charity work, etc. None of these are necessarily sinful. So how can we recognize when a good thing becomes too much of a good thing and begins to edge out God in our affections? When does a passion, interest, or skill become an idol? Perhaps asking some diagnostic questions might help. As you read through the above list, what would bother you the most to lose or have to do without? How do you react if you are cut off from it? Would you be destroyed if you lost it? When a crisis happens, where do you turn first? Where does your mind go in your free time when you can think about anything at all?

What are we supposed to do once we identify a possible idol in our life? Many of the items listed above can't merely be set aside. They are good things and gifts from God. We still have to eat. We shouldn't completely reject our family, friends, or church just because we have elevated them above God in our devotion. Idolatry is merely an external symptom of an internal disease. What does Hebrews 3:8-10 say was the underlying cause of Israel's rebellion against God? What does verse 12 of the same chapter say turns us away from God?

Getting to the root of idolatry is important. Merely removing idols from our lives without the necessary heart change is simply a matter of treating symptoms. Suppose you had chest pains and tests determined that it was caused by a dangerous blockage in your arteries. What if the doctor just gave you something to take away your pain but did nothing to unblock your blood vessels and prevent the impending heart attack? You would probably switch doctors. Idolatry is a form of heart disease. It is the result of our tendency to "go astray in our hearts." So what is the treatment for this disease? Look at Hebrews 3:13-15. What is the command in verse 15 and when is it to be done? What will help us recognize where our hearts are hard? Read Hebrews 4:12-13. How is God's Word uniquely suited to perform surgery on the hidden places of our hearts? In Hebrews 4:14-16, what does God promise to us as we come to Him for this painful operation?

Read Colossians 3:1-5 and 12-17. Talk with God about these verses, and ask Him to diagnose your heart disease. From these verses, what are some specific actions you could take to prevent idolatry from occurring or that would help you recover from it? As you choose one action to apply this week, ask God to perform "open-heart surgery" on you. Pray about this with someone, and ask him or her to follow up with you next week.

Church Idol-ship

When I first arrived at Blue Ridge I thought, “Now here is a church that’s doing it right!” After having been a member of a mainstream denomination for almost 17 years, coming to Blue Ridge felt like finally coming home. The worship music and sermons evoked an emotional response in me for the first six months of attending here. I was a mess after every service, because I was drinking deep from the waters of life after having been spiritually parched. I have been a Christ-follower for most of my life, and I have been a part of some churches that were alive and were effective in reaching others for Christ. But Blue Ridge engaged me in a way that few other churches ever had. What’s wrong with that? Nothing, except for this: recently God has made me aware that Blue Ridge is becoming an idol to me. So what does that mean? Take a look at 1 Chronicles 16:24-29 and Isaiah 42:8. According to these verses, what is worship? What does it look like?

If worship is giving God honor, praise, thanksgiving, awe, and elevation above all other things, then I have been in grave danger of replacing God with Blue Ridge. It’s all too easy to do. Now, I have to stop here and say that the leadership at Blue Ridge has done nothing to cause this. I feel that they have gone out of their way to make sure that God gets the glory for the work He is doing here. But that doesn’t necessarily stop some of us from diverting just a smidgen of that glory to this local expression of Christ’s body. And that is idol worship. I think maybe churches and church leaders can slip past the “idol radar” easier than almost anything else. But what happens when someone like me elevates a local body of believers, or even one leader, above God Himself? It sets the stage for an erosion of faith. If anything should happen in that local body that is contrary to God’s laws, this person could become easily misled and confused.

Read Acts 17:11 and 1 Corinthians 1:11-13. What did the Bereans get right? How did the Corinthians get it wrong? Did you notice that the Bereans were “God taught” while the Corinthians seemed to be elevating other people instead of developing their relationship with Christ? God has shown me how I have been putting Blue Ridge on a pedestal. I love this church and I know God has me here for a reason, but I now understand its proper place in my faith: underneath Jesus. Where is God in your life? Where is this church? Pray and ask God to help you discern if there is any reordering that needs to be done.

Expanded Definition

When I hear the word “worship,” the pictures that come to mind are similar to what I see at *Thirsty* (worship service at BRCC on the third Friday night of each month). People standing, kneeling, or face down before God, singing, praising, and offering themselves to God through prayer or song. Sometimes there is brokenness and sometimes immense joy, but one aspect that doesn’t show up or seem to fit in that environment is fear. God’s Word assures us that perfect love casts out fear. When an angel appears in Scripture with a message, many times the first words spoken are, “*Fear not.*” Multiple verses in the Old Testament command Israel not to fear going into battle or obeying something God had told them to do. This all seems so safe, giving me the impression that fear and God just don’t go together. However, there are also many verses that command us to fear God. (Leviticus 25:17, Deuteronomy 6:13, Psalm 5:7, Ecclesiastes 12:13, and Revelation 14:7 are some examples.) Isn’t that contradictory to all those other verses about not fearing? And what does that word really mean in these verses? It can’t really mean “fear,” can it?

A few places in the Old Testament that command us to fear God actually mean more of a respect for God’s holiness and position, or awe. But, as my Old Testament professor explained, most of the verses we translate as “fear” really do mean fear as in “be afraid of.” When we read all these fear verses, the overarching message is pretty clear: God alone is worthy of our fear. When we fear outcomes, people, governments, or things—like art, literature, entertainment, or new technology—we put them in a position that they do not deserve, a position that God alone is worthy of. Therefore, fearing something other than God is another form of idolatry.

My understanding of the definition of worship is a response to God in recognition of His proper place. So when we fear God alone, above all else, we recognize His true position as He has explained it to us. Take a look at 2 Kings 17:35-39. Note the word translated as “fear” in most Bible translations is “worship” in the NIV. What do these verses say about idolatry and fearing God? As you consider this aspect of idolatry, ask yourself these questions: *Are there things in my life that I fear more than God? Do I believe that God is bigger than and has more power than those things? How can I put those things in their proper place?*

Q: How can I make sure I get the Takeaway every week?

A: (1) Sign up on our website to receive the Takeaway by e-mail, (2) download the Takeaway from our website, or (3) pick up a copy as you leave the auditorium on Sunday.