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Day 7 - The Negative Effects of Idolatry

Negative Effects of idolatry

If we look to some created things to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God Himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and will break our hearts!

Like all sin, the long-term effects of idol worship are not immediately seen. At first, the idol seems to meet all of our deepest longings. But in the end, the effects of idol worship are devastating, both to us as individuals and to the community around us.

Ironically, when pursuing an idol, the last thing that we think is that getting our heart’s deepest desires might actually be the worst thing that can ever happen to us.

Effect #1: Insecurity

The first negative effect of idolatry is insecurity. One of the key things we are looking for in our idols is a sense of control and security. The old pagan idols served this purpose. People would bow down to and worship an idol, like the god of fertility, in the belief that this would guarantee a good crop or a large family. It provided a sense of security to the worshiper. We are no different. We seek out idols that we think can give us a measure of control in an oftentimes chaotic and unpredictable world. So, perhaps we worship at the altar of money and save hoards of it in order to protect ourselves against the inevitable economic downturn, believing that it has made us secure.

But the reality is that anything outside of God is inherently finite and thus inherently insecure. Our false god may seem solid on the surface, but in reality it is not. It can desert you in a moment. The bank that holds my money may collapse or I may find that all of my money was invested in a Ponzi Scheme that has collapsed.

Deep down we know this. That is why it does not matter how much money a person saves. They never feel that they have saved enough. Intuitively, we know that money is fleeting and could flee us at any moment. And yet, despite the fact that it never grants us the security we need, we continue to worship at that altar.

Effect #2: Spiritual Addiction and Slavery

Another negative effect of idol worship is slavery. Idol worshipers look to counterfeit gods in order to gain more freedom. But in the end the result is less freedom and a form of slavery. We think that by pursuing other things instead of God that we are gaining liberation, but ultimately we become enslaved to these things. Essentially, we become addicted to them.

If I gain my meaning or my security or my happiness from my family or from my work or from my house, or some other god, I become spiritually addicted to that thing. In order to keep my sense of security or happiness, I have to have it. It becomes something we cannot live without. We then fall into patterns of life that are not unlike substance addiction. We must have it, and in the classic pattern of addiction, we will begin to break rules we once honored or harm others (or even ourselves) in order to keep it.

What many people call “psychological problems” are simple issues of idolatry. Perfectionism, workaholism, chronic indecisiveness, the need to control the lives of others—all of these stem from making good things into idols that then drive us into the ground as we try to appease them. Idols dominate our lives.

An identity not based on God leads inevitably to deep forms of addiction. As in all addiction, we reach the
stage of being in denial about the degree to which we are controlled by our god-substitutes. Like all addictions, our idols hide their true addictive-proportion from us. We take more and greater risks to get an ever diminishing satisfaction from the thing we crave until a breakdown occurs. When we begin to recover, we ask, "What were we thinking? How could we have been so blind? Why did we act so irrationally? Why did we lose sight of what is right?"

Effect #3: Emptiness and Restlessness

Another negative effect of idolatry is emptiness. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God “has put eternity in the hearts of men.” In other words, God created you for Himself; for the only One who is eternal (see 1 Timothy 6:16). He has put within the human heart a place that only He—the eternal One—can fill. That is why Saint Augustine said, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

Outside of God, there is nothing that can truly fill us up; truly satisfy all of our heart’s longings. However, we all follow after our false lovers who promise to fully satisfy and fulfill us. The problem is that they are merely finite and created things; things which cannot ultimately satisfy us.

The end result of our idolatry is always a sense of emptiness, or restlessness. They are “broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” Read the following two parts of the Bible:

> Jeremiah 2:13: God said, “My people have committed two sins: They (1) have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and (2) have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

> Isaiah 55:1-3a: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.”

A life not centered on God inevitably leads to emptiness. When we leave the only One who can meet all of our needs and fulfill the deepest longings of our heart. Building our lives on something besides God not only hurts us if we don’t get the desires of our hearts, but also if we do. Few of us get all of our wildest dreams fulfilled in life, and therefore it is easy to live in the illusion that if you were as successful, wealthy, popular, or beautiful as you wished, you’d finally be happy and at peace. That just isn’t so.

Effect #4: Brokenness

The final effect of our idolatry is brokenness.

All things are created for a specific purpose. The wristwatch sitting beside me on the desk was created for the purpose of telling me the time. As long as I use a thing for the purpose for which it was created, it work well! For example, my wristwatch does a great of telling the time! But, if I use something for a purpose that it was not created for, it won’t work well and will likely become broken. Again, if I were to decide to use my wristwatch to hammer a few nails into the wall, in the first place, it would not work very well. But, in the second place, the odds are very high that I will break my watch in the process.

It is the same with us. We were created to worship God and to have an intimate relationship with Him. We were created to believe in Him, to belong to Him, and to become for Him. Whenever we give our lives over to worshiping something for which we were not created, we will not work well and, in the long run, will eventually become broken. As Tim Keller says, “The world is littered with the broken and shattered lives of people who lived for something other than God.”

But even more importantly, idolatry not only leads to individual brokenness, but it also leads to the brokenness of community. Look at what James wrote to a group of believers in his little epistle:

> What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. (James 4:1-2)

James says that the cause of broken community, of many of our relationship problems and many of our conflicts, is our desires. The word desires is the Greek word “epithumia.” Epithumia literally means “to desire
too much.” We talked about this on Day 2. The problem in the Bible isn’t desire, it is disordered desire. It is inordinate desire. It is disproportionate desire. It is loving a thing too much. It is putting something in the place of God as the ultimate thing. So, James 4:1-2 is talking about the effect of idolatry on community. It always leads to broken relationships!

**Summary**

Our hearts are created to worship God. Only He is able to give us the satisfaction that our hearts desire. When we replace Him with an idol, we are putting something in the center of our hearts that is created and is finite. It is unable to meet our heart’s deepest longings.

The end result of any idolatry is always a deep sense of insecurity, spiritual addiction and slavery, emptiness and restlessness, and brokenness.
Daily Exercise: Identifying Idol-Based Lifestyles

Again, our task this week is fourfold. First, we want to understand spiritual idolatry. Second, we want to identify our idols. Third, we want to repent of our idols. And, finally, we want to gain freedom from those idols.

Below is a list of some idol-based lifestyles. Read through the list and check any that you think might apply to you.

- **Image idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I have a particular kind of look or body image.”
- **Helping idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . people are dependent on me and need me.”
- **Dependence idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.”
- **Work idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I am highly productive getting a lot done.”
- **Independence idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I can 'be my own man/woman,' unless I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to someone or some group, unless I am out on my own with no deep and meaningful flesh-and-blood relational connections.”
- **Achievement idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I am excelling in whatever I do or I am being recognized for my accomplishments.”
- **Materialism idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.”
- **Religion idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I am adhering to my religion’s moral codes and accomplished in it activities.”
- **Individual person idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . this one person (_________________) is present in my life and happy with me.”
  - person’s name
- **Irreligion idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality.”
- **Racial/cultural idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.”
- **Inner ring idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.”
- **Family idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . my children, or my siblings, or my parents are present in my life and happy with me.”
- **Relationship idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . “Mr. or Ms. Right” is in love with me.”
- **Suffering idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . I am hurting or in a problem that requires the attention of others (only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt).”
- **Ideology idolatry**: “I am irritated, I am unhappy, I feel worthless, I am unsatisfied unless . . . my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power.”