

Worship
Tear Down Every Idol (Part 3)
February 4, 2007
Tom Pennington, Pastor
Countryside Bible Church

For those of you who are visiting with us, I should tell you that just recently we finished about an 18-month journey through the Epistle of James. And I hope within the next couple of months to begin a study of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians. But in between we're in the midst of a study of the crucial issue of worship. There really is no topic that's more central to the Christian life and faith than this. This is really what we were made to do.

Several years ago, Sheila and I traveled to England to meet with all the Grace Church missionaries who had gathered together in a conference center over near the coast of Dover. One afternoon, it was a great conference, but one afternoon we had a small window of free time so John wanted us to join him and Patricia to see the famous Leeds Castle. Now if any of you have ever been there, you know it really is a spectacular place to visit. The castle was truly remarkable, the grounds were beautiful, and of course, the food and the fellowship really couldn't be improved upon. It was in almost every way one of those rare perfect days. I say almost, because there was one thing that happened that day that still lives in infamy in our family. We'd seen the castle, and we were just starting to walk the grounds when we came upon an honest to goodness labyrinth. One of those ancient mazes made of 8 to 10-foot hedges.

Well, John and I looked at each other and decided that that would be an interesting challenge and after all, how long could it take. So, we drug our wives along with us and embarked on a journey through this maze. Well, about 45 minutes later we all found our way out after a lot of male bravado and a lot of our wives pleading with us, is there a map? Much of our time for seeing the grounds was gone, so we had to get back for the evening's events, and I think my wife Sheila is still bitter in her heart about the fact that we lost those precious 45 minutes finding our way through a maze and to this day, by the way, she hates mazes.

It's no surprise to me that the labyrinth was one of John Calvin's favorite pictures of the human condition. He described man as utterly and hopelessly lost in a maze of his own making. In fact, stealing the images of Romans 1, he said that each man's mind is like a labyrinth of error. Listen to what he wrote, "Hence arises that boundless filthy mire of error wherewith the whole earth was filled and covered. For each mans mind is like a labyrinth, so that it is no wonder that

individual men almost had their own god.” [He’s saying listen, it shouldn’t surprise that it’s almost as if there is a different god for every man.] “And from that source, that is from the labyrinth of error in man’s own mind, came all of the labyrinths of error in the world. Rethed man wanting to be somebody in himself began to forget and misunderstand the source of his good and by an act of outrageous ingratitude he set out to exalt himself in pride against his maker and the author of all that is excellent in him.”

We’ve been reminded over the last couple of weeks that every human being was created by God to worship. And he can do absolutely nothing to change what God hard-wired him to do. Every day of our lives every man, woman, and child will worship. If it’s not true biblical worship solely offered to the true God, then it will be what the Bible calls idolatry. Before we can come to the worship of the true God, Scripture’s clear that we first have to get rid of our idols. We must first tear down every rival for our allegiance. And so, we’re studying the issue of idolatry.

Just to remind you where we’ve been, we started by looking at the ,biblical “history” of idolatry and we traced our way through the Scriptures to see how idolatry has manifested itself among the people of God. Secondly, we looked at the “inherent appeal” of idolatry. And we found that really there are two inherent appeals, one is self-gratification and the other is self-rule. Last week we considered the true “source” of idolatry and we noted that there are several springs from which idolatry flows. Whether acts of outright rebellion against God to just our own sinful fallen hearts to the work of demons. We traced the sources of idolatry.

Today we come to a fourth perspective about idolatry and really the key issue. Because the fourth perspective that we need to gain, and it’s one that going to take us our entire time to grasp is this: the “biblical definition” of idolatry, the biblical “definition” of idolatry, what exactly is this idolatry that we’ve been talking about? And what forms does it take? Well, God forever defined idolatry, unequivocally, unmistakably, undeniably in the first of the Ten Commandments. And I’d like for us to begin there this morning, turn with me to Exodus 20, Exodus 20. The children of Israel find themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai just a little more than a month out of the land of Egypt. And now they find themselves encountering the true and living God. In verses 1 and 2 of Exodus 20, we have what is called the preface to the Ten Commandments, and this preface underscores their weight and their authority. They’re important, and that’s obvious because notice first of all the way that they were revealed, verse 1, “Then God spoke all of these words, saying,”

You see these things were not copied from the law code of the nations around them; these came directly from the mouth of God. Not only Moses, but some two million plus Israelites heard the voice of God say these things. They're also obviously important because of the person who revealed them, notice verse 2, "I am the Lord..." [I am Yahweh, I am the I am, I am the only self-existent being in the universe. It's important because of the people's relationship to this God, notice verse 2,] "I am the Lord your God" [and because of the grace that this God had shown them the end of verse 2 says,] "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

How exactly did these people become God's people? By His gracious act of sovereign deliverance, by an act of sovereign grace God had brought them out of slavery. And that was to be the motive for their obedience to these commands, as it is ours by the way. Now that brings us to the first command, notice verse 3, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

This first commandment, understand this very clearly, this first commandment deals with the "object" of our worship. There is only one God and He and He alone is to be the object of our worship. The second commandment deals with the "mode or the method" of worship. And so, we'll come to back to it in a few weeks. But let's look at this first command which governs the object of our worship. The Hebrew text literally reads like this, "there is not to be to you other gods to My face. There is not to be to you other gods to My face."

Now let's take that apart, first of all notice that it's addressed to you as an individual. The word for you here in Hebrew there is a different pronoun for the plural and the singular, this one is singular. So, in other words, God wasn't speaking to two million people He was speaking to every individual who made up those two million, and God is speaking to you and not to us as a group. God says to you, there is not to be to you other gods. Now what does He mean by other gods, basically it means this; any other objects of worship and devotion. There is not to be to you any other objects of worship and devotion. And then He adds, to my face or "before me" as it's translated in the *New American Standard*. That means in My presence. We could say it means really two different things, it means you are not to have any other objects of worship or devotion, number one, in place of Me, as a substitute for Me, and secondly, in addition to Me. You see this command demands fear and love and worship of the one true God and of Him alone.

Now this commandment is far reaching in it's implications for us today. But sadly, listen carefully, sadly, you and I and our culture has so emasculated a huge portion of Scripture, we

have made it irrelevant to us simply by redefining what idolatry is. Our little simplistic definition is that idolatry, “an idol is solely an object made of wood, stone, or metal that becomes the focus of devotion and worship”. Our concept of an idol as we think of it is confined to a material object someone physically falls down in front of. And so, we immediately look at all those passages about idolatry and say, doesn’t apply. Never done that, have no desire to do that. Or metaphorically when we use the concept of idolatry, we use it to refer to someone who is obsessed in the most extreme sense with something. You know, like the “groupies” who idolize a rock musician or a sports figure, hence the success of the show, “American Idol”. Or we use it as of a miser, somebody who’s obsessed with money.

Now do you see the danger here? By redefining the term idolatry, we have essentially made it not applicable to us whatsoever. We have made it only applicable to the ancient past or to some remote third world place today where they still fall down in front of a block of wood; or to the most extreme parts of our culture. But it has no application to us sitting here this morning. No application to a sophisticated city full of people in Dallas Fort Worth. But that is not the picture the Bible presents at all of idolatry. That is not all that the first commandment forbids, as Oz Guinness says in his excellent book, *No God But God*, “idols are not just on pagan altars but in well educated minds as well.” The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life. All too often it is found on center stage. In fact, by the time we’re done with our study I think you will see that every one of us in this room today, has in the past and may perhaps today be an idolater.

Now if we’re going to construct a biblical definition of idolatry, it’s very important to understand this foundational assertion. Idolatry does not require explicit denials of the true God’s existence or of His character. Let me say that again, idolatry does not require a person to explicitly deny the true God or to deny the character of the true God. Solomon of course is a great example of that. We saw several weeks ago, that Solomon, who never, as we can see from Scripture, never stopped worshiping the true God; simply added, because of the influence of his wives, the worship of false gods. Most polytheists believe that one of their gods is in charge. Take the Greeks for example, there’s this huge pantheon of Greek gods. Zeus was the god in charge. Or take the Romans, the equivalent to Zeus in Roman worship was Jupiter, and he was the chief god. Or take the Canaanites; the chief god in the Canaanite religion was El. So, you always see even in polytheism that there is one god who is dominant. In fact, you can see this in the writings of some famous people. Take the Roman writer Cicero, for example. Listen to him, he sounds at first like he’s written part of the Old Testament;

“when we behold the heavens, when we contemplate the celestial bodies, can we fail of conviction?” Must we not acknowledge that there is a divinity, a perfect being, a ruling intelligence which governs, a god who is everywhere and directs all by his power; anyone who doubts this may as well deny that there is a sun that lights us.” [Sounds great so far, so what’s his response to that. Listen to what Cicero wrote,] “For this reason with us as well as with many other nations the worship of the gods and holy exercises of religion increase in impurity and extent every day.”

Now what can we learn from that, what does that tell us? It tells us that there are many people who acknowledge that there is a supreme being but still commit themselves to the worship of other things as well. The first commandment says you shall have no other gods not only in place of Me but in addition to Me. Or as Jesus said in Matthew 4:10 quoting Deuteronomy, “you shall love the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” Now listen, this is absolutely foundational, the simple fact that you and I believe in the God of the Bible does not prevent us from being idolaters. Many of the Old Testament idolaters believed in the God of the Bible as well.

So, with that understanding then, with that basic grasp we’re ready to look at the basic forms that idolatry takes as we flesh out a definition, a biblical definition of idolatry. The way we’ll do that is by looking at the various Biblical forms idolatry takes. What does it look like? Well, I’m going to hurry through the first few simply because they are the forms that we are most familiar with and because they are the forms that we’re have less of a temptation with. So, stay with me we’re going to get to the heart, to our hearts before we’re done.

But let’s start by taking a broad overview of what are the forms of biblical idolatry or the forms of idolatry that are recorded in Scripture.

Number one: worshiping nature and its unexplained forces; worshiping nature and its unexplained forces. For example, venerating and worshiping the sun and the moon or the stars, fire or lightening. These were probably the first objects of false worship; these were the first expression of idolatry. Look at Deuteronomy 4, Moses warns the children of Israel against this, Deuteronomy 4:19, “And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”

You see, to see in the creation some unexplained force and to worship that is idolatry. Animism is, of course, the common expression of this, and there are still animists in our day, many Native Americans are animists, that is they worship the force of nature, the spirit of nature. Wickens also would fall into this category as well which is a religion that's mounting force with the growth of feminism. And so, these are forms of idolatry.

Now let's look at a second form: not only does idolatry express itself in worshipping nature and its unexplained forces, but secondly worshipping false personal gods. Worshipping false personal gods often localized in images of wood or stone; false personal gods. You know when we studied the history of idolatry in the Bible this was the most common form that we discovered, so I'm not going to back through all of those passages, if you weren't here you can get the CD or listen online. But there's one key issue about this that I want us all to understand. Realize that those images that people carved and cut out of stone and fell down in front of and worshiped, those images were usually merely physical representations of a divine being but not the being itself. You know we tend to look down on them and think that somehow in their minds that thing they cut was really their god.

In most cases that was merely a physical manifestation or representation of a spiritual being. For example, the Caananite god El, that we talked about a couple of weeks ago; he was pictured often and carved as a bull, and people would fall down and worship in front of this bull, the bull part was to illustrate his power. It was to illustrate his strength, his might. But the same god, El, in other drawings was presented as a man. And so, understand that those images often were not the gods themselves people didn't conceive of those images of the gods themselves but rather simply a manifestation of the god. Now I'm sure over time it's possible that to many of the people that animal or that image actually became in their minds the god itself, but that's not how it began. It's not the image itself that's primarily the issue; it's the fact that they are worshipping a false god through that image.

Now this form is what most people think of when they think of idolatry. Of course, the most common expression of this form in our day is found in Hinduism with its millions of gods and with its various temples and pieces of stone and metal and wood carved as objects to localize those deities and through which those spiritual beings are worshiped.

Now; although, it's typical for these false gods to be localized in images, it's also possible for them not to be. For example, in 1 Kings 18, you remember the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel and the 400 prophets of Baal? Well you remember that they called upon the lord upon their god,

or upon Baal as he's called all morning, they cut themselves they called out. There's no indication there was any image anywhere to be seen, instead they were calling to god as the storm god to Baal as the storm god to unleash lightening and consume that sacrifice. And so, they were worshipping Baal but not through an image at that point, so understand that these false personal gods could be worshiped through an image or localized through an image or not.

Let me give you a couple of modern examples of false personal gods that are in no way associated with images. One, of course, that's constantly in the news these days is Islam. Allah is not worshiped in images, but he is, nevertheless, not the God of the Bible, he is a false god. Other examples can be found in many of the cults of Christianity, for example take Mormonism. Mormon doctrine teaches that what god is, you may become, and that what you are, god once was. And in fact, humanity was physically conceived through a sexual relationship with god and his wife. Now that, I don't have to tell you is not the God of the Bible. It is a false god, even though it is not localized in images. You go in a Mormon temple and you're not going to find an image of god that they fall down in front of and worship. So, a second form that idolatry takes is: worshipping false personal gods that are sometimes localized in carved images.

A third form that idolatry takes is: deifying abstract concepts or forces, deifying abstract concepts or forces. Now the best biblical example of this is in Isaiah 65:11. There we read these words, "But you who forsake the Lord, who forget My holy mountain, who set a table for fortune, and who fill *cups* with mixed wine for Destiny," "Destiny" and "Fortune" in that verse are gods. Fortune is a god's name who stood for good Fortune, apparently a Syrian deity that was known in Palestine, and Destiny was also another god's name. Both of these gods spoke of abstract concepts or forces.

And here you have preparing the table, in Isaiah 65:11, preparing the table and filling the cups of wine, that seems to refer to cultic meals eaten in honor of these deities, these abstract principles or forces. In our day Buddhism would be a good example of this form of idolatry. Technically, Buddhists say that they are non-theist, they don't believe in a god they instead are involved with an abstract concept. Now the Buddha says that in fact all of us who worship something other than in Buddhism are in fact worshipping the Buddha himself, but nevertheless they say that there is no there is no god who is worshiped, instead, it's an it is an "abstract concept or force". Same thing would be true by the way of Scientology.

A fourth form that idolatry takes is: improperly venerating something attached to the worship of the true God. Improperly venerating something attached to the worship of the true God. Now

there are a number of biblical examples of this, let me just give you a couple, in Judges 8:27, you remember the judge Gideon, he makes an ephod, that is one of the robes like the high priests wore. And he collected a lot of jewelry, and he either attached on a piece of material a lot of jewelry a lot of gold, or he made it carved out of a piece of gold, we don't know which. But that ephod, we're told in Judges 8:27, became an object of worship, the people we're told played the harlot with it that is they treated it as an object of worship, they were unfaithful to God in worshiping this thing that was originally attached to the worship of the true God. In 2 Kings 18:4, we read about Hezekiah, and in Hezekiah's day he had to absolutely break into pieces, you remember that bronze serpent that Moses made back in the wilderness? Well it was still around, and Hezekiah had to break it into pieces because we read in those, "... until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it, and it was called Nehushtan."

It became an idolatrous object of worship even though it had been ordered by God to be made. In Colossians 2:18, in the New Testament we read of those who worshiped angels. So, if you take something that is to be used in the worship of the true God, and it becomes in and of itself an object of worship then you are committing idolatry.

Modern examples of this kind of idolatry are very common. Take the icons for example in Greek Orthodoxy. If you've been in a Greek Orthodox or an Eastern Orthodox Church, all of those icons that are have incense burned in front of them that prayers are prayed to; those have become an object of devotion and worship. And I understand how they explain that that's not true, but in reality, that's exactly what occurs. There are a number of ways that this form of idolatry is expressed in Roman Catholicism; for example: in their veneration of the crucifix, of Mary, of the wine and bread in communion, their veneration of the saints. All of those things can be part and parcel of the worship of the true God, but they have become in and of themselves idolatrous, because they are being improperly venerated and worshiped.

Number five, a fifth form that idolatry takes, and this one will surprise you, I think: is refusing to recognize Jesus as Lord, refusing to recognize Jesus as Lord. One important form of idolatry is especially seen in people's unwillingness to worship Jesus Christ and to acknowledge Him as Lord. You see a hint of this in the Old Testament, turn to Psalm 2. In Psalm 2 a very familiar Psalm to us all in verse 2 it says,

The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed," [that is the Messiah, Jesus,] saying, "Let us

tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” [So, what’s the remedy to this act of rebellion? Look down in verse 11,]

Worship Yahweh with reverence and rejoice with trembling, Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

Even here we understand that if you’re going to worship the true God, then you must also worship His Son. And to fail to do so is to fail to worship the true God. But of course, what’s here clearly screams at us and shouts at us from the pages of the New Testament. Turn to 1 John, 1 John the last verse, I mentioned this to you a couple of weeks ago, the last verse of 1 John 21 says this, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

Now in its context this warning is not about a piece of stone or a carved piece of wood; instead, it’s a warning about the false teaching about Jesus. The idolatry he has in mind is the idolatry of those who are teaching falsehood about Jesus Christ. If I had time to take you through it, we’d go through 1 John, let me just give you the verses and you can look them up in your own study time. But in 1 John 2:22 these false teachers failed to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah. In 4:2, they said Jesus Christ had not come in the flesh. They denied the humanity of Jesus Christ, that he was one of us. In 4:15, they denied that Jesus was the Son of God. In chapter 5:1 they did not love Jesus Christ and in 5:10 they did not believe in Him. Now look at 5 again and verse 20,

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols. [You see the contrast; Jesus Christ and the Father are God, to refuse to acknowledge that is to in fact be worshiping idols, just as these false teachers had done.]

Martin Luther put it this way, “outside Christ, there is nothing but idolatry and merely a false imagined notion about God”. If you want to be justified before God and saved by that sort of worship, it makes no difference whether you call its basis the Koran, the command of the Pope or even the Law of Moses. In fact, Luther held that all trust in yourself and in your own righteousness was essentially idolatry and that it was the deification of self. Let me put it to you like this, what the Scriptures say and what Luther was saying is this; if you have not

acknowledged Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior then you may as well build an image of yourself and prop it up in some room in your house and fall down in front of it and worship, because as far as God is concerned that's exactly the kind of idolater you are.

Now those are the five forms idolatry has taken and still takes in the world. But now I want us to look closer home, in our closets and in our hearts. What gods are we as Christians tempted to follow because of the pagan world in which we live? What gods are our greatest temptations? Well the final two forms of idolatry are where we find our greatest temptation. Let's look at them briefly together.

Number six in our little list: holding wrong or deficient views of the true God, holding wrong or deficient views of the true God. Now I am convinced that this is the most common form of idolatry in America today and in American evangelicalism. And compared to worshipping materialism or sexual sin or sports, it is by far the most serious and the most insulting to God. We sang this morning, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Do you know what that means? Certainly, that word speaks of God's moral purity, and He is, but it speaks of a lot more. When it's used in reference to God. God's Holiness means that He is utterly unlike His creation. He is separate from, He is unlike anything else in terms of His glory and His essential character. What an insult it must be to God, when we drag Him down by our weak and sinful thoughts of Him, when we think of God differently than He has revealed Himself. John MacArthur puts it this way, "idolatry does not begin with a sculptor's hammer, it begins in the mind." You see this is where idolatry starts, when we conceive God to be less than He really is. In Psalm 50:21, God puts it like this, "... you thought I was just like you;"

What an insult to God that must be. You thought I was just like you. You see what we do in our minds we can't deal with, or we don't want to deal with the glory of God revealed in His word, and so, we drag Him down as it were to our level where we can get our arms around Him where He can live in our little box. Where He's safe, where we can do what we want and we can pull Him out of His little box like a genie and get what we want. Well, God doesn't play along with our little games, when we think of God differently than He has revealed Himself, we are not worshipping the true God we are not worshipping the true God, we are idolaters.

Sometimes I hear Christians say something like this, in fact this is being written on the internet and in books published by Christian publishing houses. My god is a god of love; he would never send a good Muslim or Buddhist to hell. Well listen, I'm not excited about the doctrine of eternal punishment either, that's a frightening reality, but I can't reconstruct God for my own

sake, I can't make Him something other than He's revealed Himself to be and to do so is an act of idolatry.

Or somebody will say something like this, well I'm going to do this thing and I know it's wrong. But I'll do it, wink, wink, and then God will forgive me. Listen you just remade God in your own image, as if He's as weak and uncaring about a standard of righteousness as you are. That's presumption; you ought to be frightened to think that way. Or, and unfortunately, I've heard this on a number of occasions, I know you don't think it's right for me to divorce my spouse, but God wants me to be happy. You know I want to take the Bible and kind of hold it and say, show me where it says God wants you happy, outside of His own standard. No, God wants you holy and if you really love God, then holiness will make you happy. When we reconstruct God in our own image, we are worshiping an idolatrous substitute for the real thing. Now, we're going to deal with this form of idolatry more when we get to true worship, so that's all I'm going to say about it now.

Let's move on to where I want to spend the rest of our time on the seventh form of idolatry, seventh and last form of idolatry. It's the most insidious for those of us who are Christians. Number seven: giving any human desire, giving any human desire precedence over God's Word and God's will; this is idolatry, giving any human desire precedence over God's Word and God's will. Turn with me to Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul sets this forth very clearly in his third, in the third chapter of his letter to the church in Colossae. He begins the chapter by saying certain realities are true.

... you have been raised up with Christ therefore keep seeking what's above where Christ is.... Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God.

He says listen, something happened when you came to faith in Christ, it's as if all that you were and all that you used to be died, and you're a new person in Christ so, verse 5, start living like that, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead...." Literally it says, put to death the members which are on the earth. To use John MacArthur's colorful language in his book about this issue, this could be described as hacking Agag to pieces, using the analogy of the Old Testament story. We're supposed to put to death what remains in us of sinfulness. Now notice in this verse, verse 5, in the words that follow there is a movement that takes place. There is a movement from the outward manifestations of sin to the inward cravings of the heart; from acts of immorality to the inner springs from which those acts flow.

Now notice the words he uses, here's what I want you to put to death he says, in light of the reality of who you are in Christ let's start with immorality. Now immorality is the translation of the Greek word, "pornea", it refers to any illegitimate sexual intercourse. Then the word "impurity", impurity is "moral uncleanness", it refers to "immoral sexual conduct of any kind".

Passion, this is any shameful passion that leads to sexual excesses. Evil desire simply means the craving for evil. Now all of those really have to do with sexual sin. But notice then he uses the word, "and". So far, there's been no word "and". Immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire are grouped together. And then he seems to transition, some commentators believe, and I think they are probably right, to a new category: and, by the way, "greed I include as well". Now "greed" is the word "covetousness". Literally, it's the desire to have more. In some context, this word can have sexual overtones, coveting something sexually, but normally it refers to the sin of "materialism"; the "insatiable desire to get your hands on more stuff".

Now, with that in mind, notice the shocking statement that Paul makes about covetousness. He says you're supposed to consider covetousness dead, and covetousness amounts to idolatry. Now that sounds bad, but that's not nearly as bad as it really sounds. This is one of those rare cases when the *New American Standard* translators don't translate literally. What the Greek says is this, "covetousness which is idolatry". Paul uses the standard Greek verb of being. In the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:5 it says this, "... the covetous man who is an idolater..."

Now stay with me. These passages are very disconcerting, because they make it clear that idolatry does not have to include the name of the deity that you worship, nor does it have to include some determined resolve to substitute that deity for the true God. The covetous person does neither of those, he simply pursues his desires. As one author has put it, "today's idols are more in the self than on the shelf." The word "covetous" here, "covetousness refers to a strong desire in the heart for something". It means to crave either A: "what you don't have," or B: to crave "more of what you have than you ought to crave." You can covet or crave a person with the ultimate goal being sexual fulfillment, if you read the tenth commandment you see that listed there. You can covet or crave material things, you can covet or crave, and this gets us all, a change in our circumstances in some way.

Now our first hint that idolatry may be something that goes on primarily in the heart connected to our desires, comes all the way back in Job. Turn back to Job 31. Job 31 most commentators point to as sort of an introduction to this concept of desire being idolatrous. In Job 31:24, Job is defending himself, and he says,

“If I have put my confidence *in* gold, and called fine gold my trust, If I have gloated because my wealth was great, And because my hand had secured so much; If I have looked at the sun when it shone Or the moon going in splendor, And my heart became secretly enticed, and my hand threw a kiss from my mouth, That too would have been an iniquity *calling for* judgment, for I would have denied God above.”

Now what’s going on here, basically Job is saying I am not an idolater. And he gives two examples of idolatry. He gives an example of “nature worship”, like we were talking about a few minutes ago with the sun, the moon and so forth; and “materialism” in the same paragraph.

Now this concept of our desires our cravings being idolatrous is carried to a much further event by Ezekiel, I’m not going to have you turn there but I would encourage you to read Ezekiel 14, both verses 4 and verse 7; in those verses Ezekiel refers to the cravings that take place in the heart as idols of the heart. You see you don’t have to make a statue to have to be idolatrous, you don’t have to have a god other than the true God and deny Him to be idolatrous you simply have to have a craving in your heart that you give too much room to, and you become idolatrous. He refers to them as idols of the heart because we often obey them rather than God; we often worship them rather than God.

In Oz Guinness’ book we read this the crucial warning is this,

as soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol. An idol needs not be a full-size replacement for God nothing can be, we become increasingly attached to this desire until it comes between us and God making God and His commandments irrelevant or unrealistically prohibitive, and something within creation will then be idolatrously inflated to fill the God shaped hole in the individuals world.

You see, once anything displaces the rightful position of God, it becomes an idol. As Jay McMath says, “that for which I would give anything and accept nothing in exchange is the most important thing in my life. Whatever that is, is my god.”

Now what about our society? What are some of the cravings that our society falls down and worships as it were? The cravings that push God out of the heart let me give you a brief list. This is certainly not inclusive, but here are a few: pleasure, indulging the appetites of the body.

In Philippians 3 Paul refers to those whose God is their belly or their appetites their bodily appetites. That's their god, they live to satisfy it. Second Timothy 3 speaks of lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. It includes the pursuit of all such things as drugs and alcohol and sexual sin as we saw it in Colossians 3. In fact, Ephesians 4:19 speaks of sexual sin being pursued with covetousness, "greedy about it".

You know this is so appropriate, I recently read a report that the revenues of the pornography industry in the U.S. are 12 billion dollars a year. 12 billion, that is bigger than the NFL, the NBA, and major league baseball combined. World wide pornography sales are reported to be 57 billion dollars. To put that in perspective, two years ago Microsoft reported world revenue of 38 billion dollars or 20 billion less. Certainly, pleasure and sexual sin being one of the forms of that, is one of the gods of our world. Materialism, in other words, possessions, a comfortable lifestyle, money or wealth, again the issue isn't having these things, the issue is do you allow those things to place to out place God to outstrip God in your affections?

Number 3: status, respect, significance, power and control, a lot of people just want to control, if they can't control their circumstances then they will control at least their body. They starve themselves or do something else to indicate that control. Professional success, approval, acceptance, being well liked, appearance, appearing thin, appearing young, having a beautiful body, even fitness is a god to many in our culture. A few others are things like entertainment, leisure, sports, work; work can be a god and often is. Family can be a god, that's put over one's responsibility to God. Fulfillment, peace, being married can be a god. Independence, having children, or having the time to enjoy your children, or security, whether financial or physical. Those are just a few of the cravings that people in our culture literally worship.

You say, wait a minute; are you saying people really worship these things? Absolutely. Just think about the sacrifices they make to these cravings. The idolater is willing to sacrifice his time, his health, his family, his money, other people, almost anything to gain these things that he craves. Altus Huxley was right, "every idol however exalted turns out in the long run to be a Molech, hungry for human sacrifice." By the way Guinness, in his book, notes that we have also revived child sacrifice through the abortion industry and in child neglect out of loyalty to these idols.

Now maybe you didn't hear yours in the list. Okay, well let me ask you this question. What is your greatest ongoing desire, or let me put it differently, what would you give anything to have?

And once you have it, what would you do whatever it takes to keep? Whatever that thing is, it is in very real danger of becoming an idol in your life.

The problem is, though, we often lie to ourselves about the true nature of our idols. So how can we really recognize if our desires have become idols? That's the question I had to ask myself this week and you should be asking yourself. How do I know when the desire has become idolatrous? Well let me see if I can give you some help. Actually let me see if R. L. Dabney, a great American theologian, can give us some help, listen to what he wrote. Now this was written at the time of the Civil War, so listen carefully.

The most current breach of the first commandment in nominally Christian communities is doubtless the sin of inordinate affections," [that is affections or desires out of control.] "Scripture brands these as idolatry, or the worshiping of another than the true God especially in the case of covetousness and parity of reasoning extends the teaching to all other inordinate desires. We conceive formal idolatry as that of the Hindu a very foolish and flagrant thing, but we forgive the spiritual idolatry of passions. God classes them together in order to show us the enormity of the latter." [Now listen carefully.] "What then is it that constitutes the having of God for our God, it includes: love Him stronger than all other affections, trusting Him as our highest portion and source of happiness, obeying and serving Him supremely, worshiping Him as He requires, now that thing to which we render these regards and services is our God, whether it be gold, fame, power, pleasure or friends.

Did you hear Dabney's test of whether some desire has become an idol to your heart? Let me put it in contemporary language. Here you go. Do you love what you want more than you love anything else, including God? Are you willing to disobey God to have it? Is that desire and its fulfillment what you believe will bring you your highest and greatest happiness? In other words, are you convinced that that thing you want is what will bring you the greatest of happiness? If you're convinced of that, it has become an idol. If anything other than God Himself is your greatest source of happiness and satisfaction, then you have constructed an idol. Do you obey that desire and make sacrifices to satisfy it? For let me put it differently. For what do you sacrifice your time, your health, your family, and money? If it's anything other than God, then you have an idol.

Let me urge you to search your own heart, as I have mine this week. There are so many desires that are part of our souls and those desires come often from our fallenness and they cry out to be satisfied and they become literally an idol of the heart. I can't say it any better than G. Campbell Morgan has said it, listen to what he wrote.

“Let men take five minutes to shut out everything except the great fact that they stand alone with God. Some are terribly afraid to spend even as much time as that with their own thoughts. If they will, if they dare, let them ask as they stand in the light of the first commandment, what is my God, to what is my life devoted? If the answer indicates anything that puts God into the background, then in the name of heaven and of their own safety let them break down every idol and let the God who will be, who is, and who was be their God.” [Amen.]

Now in two weeks, the next time we're able to talk about these things together, I want us to put together a biblical plan to tear down the idols of our hearts and replace them with the true and living God and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we'll be ready to worship the true God.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, thank You that Your word is like a scalpel that cuts to our hearts; that it's like a hammer that shatters the idols we have built and constructed.

Father, I pray that You would help each of us as Your Spirit has taken Your Word today and applied it to our own hearts. Help each of us to be willing to rip the idols from our hearts. God, we pray with David, search us O God and know our hearts, and see if there be any way in us which causes You pain, and make that clear to us so that we can deliberately tear down every idol and worship You and Your Son alone.

We pray it in Jesus' name, Amen.