

Session Six: Fighting Sin: Idolatry

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome back to Gospel Growth. We have been talking about growing up in the gospel, and that's a process, right? It's a journey of becoming more like Jesus. And we talked about things that help us in that journey, things like reading our Bibles and praying, and of course, those are critical. But we have to make sure that we do the things that help us grow, and we avoid the things that keep us from growing. For example, if you planted a vegetable garden, you would need to add water and fertilizer and make sure you have the right amount of sunlight, but you also have to take out the weeds. And so we're going to talk about some of that today. What are the weeds that we need to deal with? And in particular, we're going to talk about a specific kind of sin called idolatry. Now, I'm going to explain what idolatry is in just a minute. But first, I want to help you see how severe this kind of sin is. Idolatry in the Bible is, generally speaking, it's the sin that gets mentioned the most. It's all over the place. We're going to look at that in just a second. But

I want you to see why this is such a big deal for us today. In Romans 8, 13, Paul says this. He says, for if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. So he's talking about sin. And he's saying, look, something is going to die. It's either going to be you or it's going to be sin. There's no way around it. Or as John Owen said, be killing sin or it be killing you. So being a Christian is not merely about having the right set of beliefs. It's not merely about the new behaviors that we're supposed to take part in, although those things are, of course, very important. When you become a Christian, you are getting kind of like drafted or conscripted into a spiritual war, a battle, a fight. And the problem is a lot of us don't realize that. We're just kind of coasting through life, doing our thing and expecting that life's supposed to be easy. And either we didn't ever realize or we have forgotten that our faith is a fight. It's a battle. It's a wrestle. Probably all of us have seen or know of someone who has really just made a total shipwreck of their life from some terrible decisions, from really big sin, really terrible behavior. And sometimes we never saw it coming. Someone who has an affair and wrecks their marriage and destroys their family. Someone who embezzles money from their place of employment. The thing is, these things generally do not happen overnight. They generally happen as a result of a drift. That drift takes time. You get off course. Nobody notices at first.

But there's a series of decisions that lead to moral collapse. There is an erosion that's happening over time. And that drift happens when we stop fighting, when we stop being aggressive about our faith. We forget that faith is not a walk in the park. It is a battle. J.C. Ryle says this, the saddest symptom about many so-called Christians is the utter absence of anything like conflict and fight in their Christianity. They eat, they drink, they dress, they work, they amuse themselves.

They get money, they spend money. They go through a scanty round of formal religious services once every week. But of the great spiritual warfare, its watchings and strugglings, its agonies and anxieties, its battles and contests, of all this, they appear to know nothing at all. The worst chains are those which are neither felt nor seen by the prisoner. Do you find in your heart of hearts a spiritual struggle?

[4 : 1 6] Are you conscious of two principles within you contending for the mastery? Do you see anything of war in your inward man? Well, thank God for it. It is a good sign. It is evidence not to be despised.

Anything is better than apathy, stagnation, deadness, and indifference. The child of God may be known as much by his inward warfare as by his inward peace. I served for a few years in the United States Marine Corps.

And when I was deployed to Afghanistan, at the gate on the way out of the base was a gigantic sign that said complacency kills. When you get lazy, when you forget that you are fighting a war, you are at your most vulnerable and maybe a moment away from being taken out by the enemy.

Complacency kills and so it does with us.

So we have to fight. So how do we begin to fight our sin? Well, some of us are maybe not engaged in the fight because we don't realize what kind of fight it is. You know, maybe our lives, frankly, just feel comfortable and most things are maybe fine. But the war against the sin of the heart is so subtle. And a lot of times people who look very put together on the outside actually may be totally overcome with sin on the inside just as much as someone who is addicted to heroin or cheating on their spouse. And that's because the battlefield is in the heart. The battlefield is the heart. The question is, what will we worship? What will we worship?

The Bible makes this very clear that sin is not merely a result of what you do on the outside. It actually happens. And I would argue even sin primarily happens when we decide to love something or worship something in our heart more than we love and worship God. And so the way that the Bible talks about that is with the language of idols and idolatry. In fact, the 10 commandments, which is like the center of the law in the Old Testament, we see this right off the bat. Here's how the 10 commandments open. Exodus 20 verses 1 through 3. And God spoke all these words saying, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. God says, look, this is what I've done for you. I've chosen you to be my people. Now here's what it looks like to be my people.

[6 : 59] First commandment, you shall have no other gods before me. Now you may think to yourself, well, I got that. That's easy. Got that one down. You know, I don't, I don't even believe in any other gods, but not so fast. Don't rush past this too quickly. Martin Luther wisely wrote about this commandment and he pointed out that a God does not have to be a divine being. A God can be anything.

He says that God means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress. A God is, is anything that meets that criteria. It's a great definition. So something from which we expect all good, something that we look to for our ultimate satisfaction and joys where we look to, to find the good life. Again, uh, you may not say out loud that you look to something for your ultimate joy, but this is reflected in, in how we live. It's, this is very practical. What are the things that we go to when we're down? Where do we go to when we need a shot in the arm, when we need wind in our sails? Or he said, we also, gods are things that we, uh, we take refuge in them from all distress. So it's things that we look to for security and peace, things that we think will save us. And so a God is anything that we think will make us happy and any, anything that will make things. Okay. Satisfaction and salvation. A God is something that you will worship and you will sacrifice for, and you will obey. And by the way, in the 10 commandments, it's actually not just the first commandment that talks about this. The second commandment has to do with not making carved images. And many, uh, translations specifically use the word idol and idol is a representation of what the heart wants and idols are everywhere. Again, we may not, uh, we may think, oh, we don't worship idols. We don't go to temples and bow down to statues, but we do give and sacrifice to things all the time that represent what we, what we want in life. And then the 10th commandment says that we shall not covet or envy. But you know, in Ephesians, Paul says that those who covet, which is, which is those who have desires, uh, insatiable desires for things that are not ours.

He says those people are idolaters because when you covet something and desire it more than you should, you've turned it into an idol. So there's 10 commandments. Three of them are about idolatry.

That's how big of a deal idolatry is in the Bible. And it's, it's not just an ancient world thing. It's a human nature thing. It's, um, it's the, there's a reason that in the Bible, it's, it's the biggest problem. And if the Bible was written today, it would still be the biggest problem.

[9 : 52] People all around us, including ourselves at times we're loving, worshiping, and sacrificing for things more than God every day, which is why the Bible takes it so seriously. The battle of sin is waged in the heart. And here is the question that your heart is warring over.

What will you worship? Where will you go for joy? Where will you go for peace? Where, what will come first place in your heart? Will it be God or will it be something else? Because everybody worships something and this, and there's just no way around this. Um, this is like, this is what it means to be a human. We are worshipers. And when you decide that something is worthy, that that's what you do.

You give it your worship. And so what God says in the 10 commandments is that if you put something before him or decide in your heart, that something is more worthy than of him, it's, it's not just a general sin problem. It's specifically a worship problem. You have an idol and it's very important to realize that idols are generally not bad things to start off with. Tim Keller, who is a pastor in New York City, has become famous for this saying that, that idols are good things, which we turn into God things, we're ultimate things, and that makes them bad things. But most of the case, most of the time, in most cases, those things were, were good things to begin with. They were a gift. The problem is we loved them more than the giver. And so idols can lead to big, obvious sin, the, of, of the worst kind. And we, you know, it's very obvious to see when someone tries to find their joy and satisfaction in alcohol or pills, well, they become an addict. Substances, uh, they make really terrible gods because they don't deliver on their promises.

They enslave us. Um, and, and we see this in other areas too. Sexual sin. People go to pornography or, or, or, or a relationship with, with someone at work that, um, with someone else who maybe is married and doesn't belong to us. You know, these, we see these things happen. We see people make a train wreck of their lives with things like drug addiction or, uh, adultery and, uh, those kinds of things. But, but not all idolatry is as obvious on the surface. Not all idolatry seems so severe and yet it is severe. It's all spiritually destructive. Example, I could make an idol out of water sports.

I can make an idol out of recreation. I look to fun experiences to fulfill me. In fact, this is one that I think a lot of people struggle with. How often have we heard people defend behavior by saying, I'm just, it's just a bit of fun. I'm just having fun. There's nothing wrong with it as long as we're having fun. And it doesn't seem so bad. Fishing, surfing, boating, none of those are bad things.

[12 : 43] Of course not. But what if those things become a God thing? Now, I doubt any of us bow down to our fishing tackle, but I think what we can do is we put those things in first place in our heart. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning. It's what we sacrifice for. It's where our time goes, our energy goes. It's the thing we think we have to have to be happy. It's the thing that we have to have to deal with anxiety. That's where I go. It's the only place I go to work out my stress and anxiety.

And when you do this, when we take God's good gifts and we turn them into idols, two things are bound to happen. First, it's no amount of that idol, no amount of that thing is ever enough. There is a relentless chase to keep being filled up by it. It never actually satisfies you get through one weekend and now you're living for the next weekend. And then the second thing that happens is that the other areas in your life will always suffer because we always sacrifice for what we worship. Our idols take things from us. What you worship will always come first because the gods always win.

They will take from you. And that's how you know you have an idol. If you enjoy a hobby, well, that's great. That's a part of your life. But if you worship your hobby, it isn't a part of your life.

It is your life. And the other aspects of your life will bow down and serve it, which is one of the things worth pointing out about the father is that actually when you worship him, the other areas of your life get better, not worse. Our idols don't do that to us. They make everything else terrible.

We skip time with our family to go because we're so enslaved to whatever it is that we're addicted to or what we're worshipping or we don't find ways to serve others because our time is always filled up with the things that make us happy. All of us have idols. All of us. We all have idols that we're prone to worshipping, maybe comfort, approval, control, sports, advancement in our career, power, money, sex. I mean, it's we're all vulnerable to this stuff. And if we don't identify and crush our idols, they will crush us.

[14 : 55] The author, David Foster Wallace, is quite famous for some of his insights on what we're talking about. He says this, in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there's actually no such thing as atheism.

There's no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you'll never have enough. Never feel you have enough.

It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.

Worship power and you'll feel weak and afraid. You will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They are the kind of worship you just gradually slip into day after day without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings because the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self.

[16 : 24] Wow. We live in a world of idols and idolaters. All kinds of things are fighting to be first in our heart. Are we fighting back? Well, let's talk about how we fight our idols. A few things. First, we have to know what they are. You have to recognize your idols. And this is not always as easy as it sounds. Here are some questions that I think can help identify your idols. Where do you look for satisfaction? What do you think you need to be able to call yourself successful and to be happy in life?

What do you get most anxious about losing? Someone once put the question to me a little bit differently. Someone once asked, where is the line up to which you will obey God, but beyond which you would tell you would tell God no further? Because wherever that line is on the other side of it, that is your idol.

The thing that you think you cannot lose. Where do you most effortlessly put your time, your money, and your resources? When you get angry, does it reveal that there is something that you have to have a sense of entitlement about something that you feel you can't live without? When you are sad or depressed, does it reveal that you have hung your joy on an idol that is letting you down? Now, I want to be clear. What we're not saying is that you can't enjoy things in life. In fact, God gave us lots of gifts for the purpose of enjoying them. And we're also not saying that if something you love is taken away, that you shouldn't be sad about it. What we are saying is there's a hierarchy to our love, and our desires. What is at the top? That's what these questions are trying to answer.

When we recognize that there is something in our lives that is at the top that isn't God, well, that's an idol. It's become a refuge and the ultimate source of satisfaction instead of Jesus.

And then we have to not just recognize it. We have to do the thing that Christians are always supposed to be doing every day. We're supposed to repent and believe the gospel. That's what you're supposed to do when you identify an idol. This was the first announcement of the ministry of Jesus when he burst onto the scene. This is what he was telling people. Repent and believe the gospel. And that's still what Christians are supposed to be doing today. The answer to idolatry is repentance and faith.

[18 : 56] At One Harbor, we like to say, birds fly, fish swim, Christians repent. It's something that we should be doing all the time, and it never ends. Repentance just means turning. It's like when you're driving and you realize you've not been going in the right direction. You don't just feel remorse about it.

You turn the wheel. You start going in the right direction. So we have to constantly be turning the wheel and turning from sin, from our idols, turning back to Jesus. It's reminding our soul that actually, if we have him, we don't have to have anything else. He is enough for us. He gives us other gifts, but he's the one thing, the one thing that we need. He's better than everything. He's better than comfort.

He's better than the approval of men. He's better than worldly pleasure. He's better than recreation. He's better than fame. He's better than everything. And repentance is acknowledging that we've gone to lesser things. And we've said that they are better than him. And so we have to turn. And then when we turn, we remind ourselves all over again, we freshly put our faith back into the saving work of Jesus and the gospel. That's the good news that Jesus didn't die for us because we're spotless, but because we were idolaters, people who worship the wrong things, who worship badly. Our hearts are idol factories.

But he loved us and died for us anyway. And his grace is sufficient for us. Everything else that you can worship. You know, we've gone through a number of those things, money, sex, power, career, fun, even family, all the things that we're tempted to give our lives to, they will demand and demand and demand, but they don't fulfill their promises. When you're dying on your deathbed and you're dying moments, those things, those things will not come for you. They cannot help you. But in that moment, in your worst moment, there is one person who will help you. On your way down to the grave, Jesus is the one who can step in and say, I'm not leaving you down. I'm bringing you back

up.

Idols take things from us and leave us empty. And Jesus, we have everything. And he gives us the Holy Spirit so that we could live life to the fullest. So until you are filled with him, with his spirit, you will be eaten alive by idols. You'll never have enough. You can identify one idol and reject it. But if you don't turn to him, you'll just go to another one, something else to fill the void. So the question I have for you is, are you engaged in the fight? Are you fighting? Because if you're not fighting, that means the idols are winning. Christians recognize their idols and they repent of their idols and they believe in the gospel. Know your sin, fight your sin, trust your Savior.

[21 : 50] We're going to talk a little bit more about fighting our sin in the next session. But for now, I'd encourage you to think about what the idols in your life are. Where do you need to be fighting sin more? Where is the worship in your heart going wrong? And what do you need to do about that?

Again, where's that line on the other side of which you would tell God no further? And then I'd encourage you bring other people into the conversation. It's really helpful to talk out loud about these things, to confess our weakness and our need for help. It's a gift that we don't have to fight alone. It's sometimes easy to imagine we're doing worse than anybody else. Actually, we're all in this thing together and we can encourage one another. So God bless you as you fight your sin and trust your Savior.