

Opening.

Do you ever get into a fight with yourself? I mean, do you ever struggle with your own thinking and desires and responsibilities so much that you get too worn out to even want to get anything done? Or maybe you've felt like Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: "For what I am working out, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate." (Rom 7:15, LSB)

I have been fighting with myself all week. Every time I tried to set my mind to something, I got distracted. One of my biggest struggles reared its ugly head at every turn... procrastination. When I finally sat down to start writing, I began to realize that distractions and a proclivity to procrastinate were not my issue. I'm preaching about idols, or little g gods, today and I had my own little g that I was serving all week while trying to still be obedient to Top G.

I had an idea of where I felt God was leading me for this sermon, but it felt like too big of a task, so I spent more time playing my guitar at the beginning of the week than I usually do. I felt like I needed to have conversations with a few friends about some teaching that we received together, but I was afraid I might offend some of them or cause rifts in our friendship, so paid more attention to reels and TikTok videos that I could send to them. I started remembering a lot of things that I've needed to get done for a long time but instead of doing anything productive, I chased expensive meals, other comfort foods, sugary drinks, and scrolled social media. When I did finally make a good and economical dinner at home, it wasn't enough to simply enjoy it... I felt the need to post it online to see if I could get some likes. Yesterday, I continued to avoid working on this sermon... On Friday, we divvied up some tasks to clean up the house before the weekend (which I put off until yesterday). Instead of simply tidying up and vacuuming the floors, I felt the need to scrub the carpets in certain areas and even pull out the carpet scrubber because I was avoiding what I knew was going to be a long process... writing a sermon that I need to hear more than I need to preach.

I've got a handful of little g's that keep me from giving God my everything in every moment. There's that dopamine hit from binging social media or sweet desserts. I long for the instant satisfaction of being recognized for a job well done rather than waiting to hear my heavenly Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I bow down to maintaining the status quo with friends instead of bowing to the convictions that God has laid on my heart to say things that I'm afraid might disrupt that status quo.

Are you surprised? How can someone like me get up and lead worship so passionately when they're carrying around a false god everywhere they go? How can someone like me stand up to preach on something that he struggles with himself? I'll tell you, it's only by God's grace that I can sing songs in front of you with my full attention on the One True God. It's only by God's grace that I can stand before you now in humility and share this struggle I have with the hope that this sermon will help you grow closer to God.

Defining Idols.

Before we go on, let me ask you one thing. Do you have an idol that you carry around with you? Let me rephrase that to be a little more direct. What is the little god that you serve when you're not serving Jesus?

Little gods or false gods are synonymous with idols, but what is an idol?

Timothy Keller wrote a book called *Counterfeit Gods*, and in it he defines idols as:

... 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.

A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving "face" and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry. When your meaning in life is to fix someone else's life, we may call it "co-dependency" but it is really idolatry. An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship...

*If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol."*¹

Ed Stetzer talks about idolatry this way:

*Is it that a 12-inch tall piece of wood or bronze can do something bad to us? Or is it that we do something awful to ourselves when we place adoration and attention that should go to God in other things? When it comes to idolatry, the danger is not in an item... it is in us.*²

When I first started thinking about preaching on idolatry, I thought about giving a broad overview of all the idols found in the Bible and then briefly mentioning how the idols we

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), Kindle edition, location 190-205.

² Ed Stetzer, "Smashing Idols: Why Today's Church Leaders Must Still Fight the Same Old Battle," ChurchLeaders, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/176843-ed-stetzer-smashing-idols-why-today-s-church-leaders-must-still-fight-the-same-old-battle.html>.

have today are no different. We could spend a whole series on the idols and false gods found in the Bible and never get to the heart of the matter: all of us have a predisposition to be drawn away from God by something else.

Prone To Wander.

There's an old hymn, written in 1758, that paints that picture with piercing lyrics:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;

When you look at that verse in its entirety, the language points to a need for us to be bound to God in order to not wander away from Him.

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!

This language can be a little confusing if you take it at face value. Grace is a gift from God, not something that we can owe, and as such, not something that we can owe anything in return for. But it is hard to experience the fullness of God's grace and not feel indebted to Him. That's why James writes that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17). If we have faith in the completed work of God's grace through Jesus Christ, then our actions are bound to reveal that faith. So, I know I can't earn God's grace, but I feel that I owe Him all that I am because of His grace.

Then there's the next phrase:

Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to Thee.

How many of you know what a fetter is? I've sung this song countless times, and I never knew what a fetter was until I looked up this week. It's a chain used to restrain a prisoner, typically placed around the ankles. So, when we sing those lyrics, we are literally praying that God uses His goodness to chain our hearts to Himself. That gave me a whole new perspective on Romans 6:22-23: "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your benefit, leading to sanctification, and the end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (LSB)

But how often do we kick against the very idea of being a slave to God? Even the language of slavery can instill feelings that we don't like. Instead, we choose what parts of the Bible to read and apply and which parts to ignore or explain away. We do everything we can to get the kids to school or practice or a game on time but use them as an excuse to come late to church. We serve when an opportunity is convenient and doesn't cost us anything instead of offering our time and resources to whatever need there might be. I'm preaching to myself here. To borrow the words of the great theologian, Charlie Peacock, "I am the king of

excuses. I've got one for every selfish thing I do." *If you were listening to CCM music in the mid 90's, you have a DC Talk song playing in your head now.*

We really are "Prone to wander" and "prone to leave the God [we] love," aren't we?

Idolatry In Scripture.

We see this same issue early in the history of Israel. From Rachel stealing the household gods from her father in Genesis 31 to Joshua revealing that Abraham's father served other gods in Joshua 24.

But in Exodus 20-23, God gives His people specific instructions through Moses at Mount Sinai. There are the initial terms of God's covenant with Israel that we know as the 10 Commandments, and then 52 other laws that fill out the first ten in more detail. Israel was all in and agreed to the terms of the covenant.

In Exodus 24:3, the people said "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." (ESV) Moses wrote everything down and Israel again agreed to be obedient to the Lord: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Exo 24:7, ESV) So Moses ratified the covenant with the blood of oxen before God called him back to the mountain top to receive instructions for how to build a sanctuary that would be God's dwelling place with His people: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." (Exo 25:8, ESV)

So, to summarize, God, through Moses, gave Israel rules to live by as His chosen people, and they all agreed to follow them. Then Moses went back up the mountain to receive more instructions, leaving the people with his older brother, Aaron.

As I read what happens while Moses is on the mountaintop with God, keep in mind that Israel was surrounded by the Egyptian gods for 400 years before being freed from slavery, but they never worshipped those false gods. Now they are free and had just entered into a covenant with Yahweh, the one true God. I'm going to read from the Legacy Standard Bible because it renders God's name as Yahweh instead of the LORD. That differentiation will help with some nuance that we find in this passage.

Exodus 32:1-6 (LSB)

¹Then the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain. So the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Arise, make us gods who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ²And Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me." ³Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. ⁴And he took *this* from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "These are your

gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”⁵ And Aaron looked and built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to Yahweh.”⁶ So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play.

I didn't mention this before, but God's glory had settled on the mountain like a cloud before Moses was called back up. To the people, it looked like a “consuming fire” (Exo 24:17) on the mountaintop. So they could see a physical manifestation of God's presence, even though they could not see God Himself. We also see in Exodus 24:18 that Moses was on the mountain for 40 days.

So the people of Israel are waiting and the figure Moses either died or deserted them. They don't know what happened to him, and this consuming fire on the mountain wasn't enough for them. Aaron was left in charge when Moses left, so they went to him and said “we need gods we can see so we can figure out what to do next.” So Aaron gets them to bring their jewelry to him and he melts it all down to form a statue of a calf.

Now, let's slow it down here.

The people say “These are your gods.” That sounds weird, right. It's one statue, but in Hebrew, they use a generic term for god that is always written in a plural form, “Elohim.” You may have heard this term before. It is sometimes attributed to the one true God in scripture but is also used as a term for false gods. It is sometimes thought to mean “supreme one” or “mighty one,” and is often shortened and appended to other words or names. Samuel means “heard by God,” Elijah means “God is Yahweh.” You may have heard of God referred to as “El Shaddai,” which is the name Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew Him as. El Shaddai means “God Almighty” or “Almighty God.”

So, the people are saying “this statue is your Elohim. This Elohim saved you from Egypt.” Then Aaron looks at it and tries to redirect all the people. He builds an altar at the statue and declares a party in the name of Yahweh for the following day. Rather than agreeing that the statue is the Elohim of the people, he tries to get people to use it as a representation of the one true God. The people were trying to worship a false god and, although he had good intentions, Aaron pivoted them to a false worship of the true God. Both are idolatry.

God made His position on idolatry crystal clear in the first two commandments, and all of Israel agreed to obey.

Exodus 20:2-5a (ESV)

²“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them...

Modern-Day Idols.

Do remember how Timothy Keller defined idols? “... anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”³ It sounds to me that the people of Israel may have even turned Moses into an idol of sorts. He disappeared for 40 days, and they felt like they couldn’t go on!

Is there anything in your life that you feel like you wouldn’t be able to go on if you suddenly lost it? Sometimes I think a lot of us see our smartphones that way. Have you ever accidentally left your phone at home and turned around to get it as soon as you realized it? When you sit down to a meal at a restaurant, where is your phone? Is it in your pocket or your purse? Is it resting on the table next to you? Is it in your hand when you could be giving the person at the table your full attention? Or did you leave in the car and could care less if you had it with you?

Is there something that you adore or pay attention to in the way that you should adore God and pay attention to him?

Often (usually) the things that become Elohim in our lives are good things that we elevate above Yahweh. Let me give you 10 examples of modern-day idols. I’ve adapted many of them from an article I found by Jeffery Poor.⁴ There are many more, but I think these are the most common. And these are generally good things, but like Ed Stetzer said, the danger is not in the things, it’s in ourselves.⁵ What are we worshipping? To rephrase it, what are we devoting our time, talents, and treasure to?

Identity.

Who are you? Maybe you find your identity in what others say about you. Your idol may be the opinion of others. Maybe you’ve cast off those titles that others have put on you, but you’ve made yourself to be the most important part of your life. You fiercely protect your time. Self-care has gone from something that is a healthy way to steward the body and mind that God gave you to where you find joy and meaning. Your idol may be yourself if you’ve elevated your devotion to self-care above your devotion to God, or even to the same level as your devotion to God. There’s a children’s book that has a lot of good things about stripping off the false identities that the world puts on you, but it ends by saying God’s greatest gift to you is your spirit. That’s just not true. God’s greatest gift to you is Himself. He is your perfect, loving Father. He is Jesus Christ who died for you to have eternal life. He is

³ Keller, Counterfeit Gods, location 193.

⁴ Jeffery Poor, “10 Surprising Modern Day Idols (How To Identify Idol Worship In Your Life),” Rethink, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.rethinknow.org/idol-worship-today>.

⁵ Stetzer, "Smashing Idols."

the Holy Spirit who has been given to you to sanctify you into the image of Christ. Have you placed more or value on who you are than who God is? Identity might be your little g.

Money and Things.

It doesn't matter how wealthy or poor you are. Money and things can become gods in your life. The pursuit of happiness has become the pursuit of wealth for many in America. We read how we are to be enslaved to God, but Proverbs 22:7 says, "the borrower is the slave of the lender." This is one I am guilty of. I serve my lenders significantly more than I serve God with my money. Even if I disregarded student loans, my credit card payments are far higher than my offerings to God. I bowed down to the god of things far too long and I'm literally paying the consequences of that idolatry. Maybe you're not in debt at all, but you've built up a savings so much that you don't have to trust God to provide for you. Your trust is in your money, and it has become an idol. Money is a major issue for many of us, and it's been a major issue for a long time. Jesus spoke directly to the idol of money: Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (ESV)

Jobs.

When I asked who you are, you might have thought about what you do for a living. What you do is not who you are unless it is an idol for you. What is more important to you, your title at work, your salary, career advancement, accolades for exceeding performance standards, or doing your job in a manner that glorifies God? I read on a website that employment dissatisfaction is at an all-time high. Maybe that's because jobs have been elevated to a place they don't belong. If your job has become more than a way to provide for your family; if it's become where you find your identity, there's a good chance that your job has become a god to you.

Physical Beauty.

This isn't just for the ladies. Are you more concerned about making it to the gym every day than opening your Bible? Do you spend two hours prepping and primping for an hour spent at church? Think about how much you've spent on gym memberships or beauty products versus how much you've spend on Jesus. "42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'45 Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" (Mat 25:42-45, ESV) Exercise and taking care of your physical appearance are good things but they ought not become the ultimate thing. We can easily lose sight of God when we look in the mirror at ourselves.

Entertainment.

Have you ever looked at how much time you spend watching TV in its many streaming forms, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram Reels, sports, concerts, movies, planning vacations, and listening to podcasts? Entertainment itself is not bad but it has turned into an addiction for some. You might open TikTok for a little dopamine hit and a couple laughs but 180 short videos later and you've lost 3 hours of your day. When's the last time you spent even one hour in prayer, just you and Jesus?

Sex.

Sex is a good gift from God that has become an idol for many. Has become inescapable in our culture today. Addiction to pornography, fornication, sexual identity, and a preoccupation on lustful thoughts are just a small sample of the little gods we might find in our lives. Engaging in any sexual ethic outside of God's design for sex is akin to saying "my sexual desire is more important than God." It doesn't even have to be an addiction. When we use sex outside of God's design, it has become an idol. We could also go back to identity again with this one; to identify as something other than how God made you is to make your sexual identity your god. I want to mention here that if this is an idol for you, there are specific groups available here to help you. Bondage to sexual sin is especially difficult to break free of and you don't have to try to do it alone.

Spouse and Children.

This is a touchy one for a lot of people. Your spouse and children are truly a blessing from God, but do you have a proclivity to worship the gifts instead of the giver? Many who have lost a spouse or child have experienced those feelings that life is not worth living. Some of those feelings are a natural part of grieving, but if they persist and lead you down the road of wanting to give up on life yourself, that might be a sign that they were an idol in your life. If that is you, please don't hear this as in an accusatory tone like I think you just need to get over it. Grief is a hard enough to deal with. You also do not have to walk through it alone. We offer a GriefShare group here at the church a couple times a year, and anyone who has lost a loved one would benefit from it.

Human Connection.

Whether it's in real life or virtual connection through our devices, if you thrive on being around people or connecting through apps like Marco Polo, you might have elevated your connection to others to godlike status. I'd even include social media as a form of this idol because there is a feeling of genuine connection, regardless of relational authenticity, to the people we interact with on social media. We might scroll for hours on social media, but we tend to not swipe as fast when we recognize the person on the screen. Then there's the real-life gatherings of people. Hebrews even tells us to not neglect gathering together (Heb 10:25), but if you long for that more than we seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mat 6:33), you might be idolizing people.

Influence.

This is another one that is a struggle for me if I'm not careful. Who doesn't like to see the views and hearts go up on a social media post? Some of the most common responses kids give when asked what they want to be when they grow up are YouTuber or Influencer. With the explosion of social media, we can easily be tempted to chase the likes and follows instead of chase after the heart of God. If you can post something on any of the social medias and not look back at it again to see how many people hit that like button, then this probably isn't a problem for you. But if you keep coming back for updates or wish you could gain some traction in the follower department, it might mean that God has taken a back seat to your pursuit of clout.

Aaron's Golden Calves.

Golden calves are sneakier than other idols because they look like an honest way to approach God. A golden calf might be the emotions you felt at a worship event that you keep chasing after because you want to experience those feelings again. Church attendance could even be an idol if you see it as a way of punching your God card for the week. I'll be surprised if I don't make someone angry with this one. Maybe you like to watch The Chosen because it helps you see a different side of Jesus. You might not be singing worship songs while you watch it, but you are approaching Jesus through a created image that cannot ever represent Him perfectly. If that's not false worship of the true God, it will surely lead to it.

Closing.

This isn't just a list of things we should avoid in order to be more holy and closer to God. Like I said earlier, many times an idol is something that is good that we've elevated to a place it doesn't belong. When we worship an idol, we reverse what worship should be. Instead of sacrificing what is good to the One who is greatest, we sacrifice God on the altar of our idol. Romans 12:1 says to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (ESV) If we offer all that we are, anything that might be an idol burns on the altar of pure worship.

Many of us have idols. We just don't realize it. Maybe one of the idols I talked about today struck a nerve. I wasn't trying to target you in particular, but God might want to work something out of you. Maybe you didn't relate to any of the idols I mentioned. You might have God in the right place in your life right now. I hope that's the case because the alternative is that you don't recognize your idol for what it is. Before we receive communion today, let's take a few moments to ask ourselves a few questions that just might lead us to repentance.

1. Where do I spend my time?
2. How do I use my talents?
3. Where do I spend my money?
4. What occupies my mind?
5. Where do I find my joy?

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