

Idolatry

LESSON 10

Scripture Reading

Deuteronomy 10:12–22, 12:29–13:8, 30:11–20

1. In Deuteronomy 10:12, what does the Lord ask of us? Why are we to do these things (v. 13)?
2. "The Lord has set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today." (Deut. 10:15 NIV) Describe what this means to you personally.
3. What other attributes of God, besides His love, do you find in verses 16-22 of Chapter 10?
4. In Deuteronomy 12:29–13:8, God is clear about the seriousness of the sin of idolatry, so serious that the death penalty would be imposed for this type of offense. Look up 1 Corinthians 10:20, Ephesians 5:5, and Colossians 3:5. What do these Scriptures indicate as they relate to idolatry?
5. There is a close connection between worship and idolatry. What do you think the connection is?
6. According to Deuteronomy 30:11, "what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." Sometimes it feels like loving God with all of our hearts and being obedient to a loving God is beyond our reach. Why?
7. It appears that the first step in disobedience is a matter of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:17). Knowing how deeply God cares for us, what turns our hearts from responding to God and choosing something or someone that we think will offer us more satisfaction?
8. Which do you choose more often: life or death? (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)? Why?

Consider This

Whom or what do you worship? This seems like an easy question...God, of course! We wholeheartedly agree that He is our Savior and Lord, that He alone is worthy of our worship. However, upon closer examination of idolatry, we do well to take a deeper look inward to probe our underlying desires and motivations for areas of corruption that can lead our hearts astray.

God strictly forbids idolatry. There are 215 references to idols and idolatry in both the Old and the New Testaments, and 230 references to other gods. Have you ever wondered why God is so emphatic about idols? If we don't trust His holiness and instead assign human attributes to His ways, we may be tempted to believe that He has some type of self-serving, narcissistic motive in mind. We must trust the fact that God asks us to keep away from the things of this world that would capture our hearts "for our own good".¹

God warns us that idols will become a snare to us: "Do not make a covenant with them (the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites) or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you."² Idol worship can lead to fear, superstition, unfulfilled hope, a sense of insignificance, and ultimately, captivity to lesser gods. God knows that the emptiness of idolatrous living can lead us to paths of personal destruction with inevitable consequences and pain. But because of God's great love for us, He has commanded (not suggested) that we do not let the things of this world capture our hearts. Instead, He wants us to live in the significance and hope of His great, eternal love through our new life in Christ!

Idolatry is the worship and admiration of something or someone other than the Triune God. Two of the deepest needs that we have in life are the needs for significance and love. Because these are relational needs, and God's desire is to have us respond to Him relationally—"love the Lord with all of your heart"³—we know that He is to be our primary relationship. While we recognize that our longings for significance and love will not be fully satisfied this side of heaven, as we engage God, we can have a foretaste of what will someday be a complete relationship with Him. But often, we don't go to Him. Instead, we desire something that is more tangible, someone else who is more "real". Therefore, we either consciously or subconsciously begin to look for other ways to satisfy our longings for significance and love. Thus, the wandering begins...

The road is broad. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."⁴ That broad road includes idolatry. It seemingly offers us what appears to be carefree travel with an abundance of temporal pleasures. For instance, if what we own becomes our identity, and if we want others to be impressed by how much we have, the labels we wear, or the electronic equipment we possess, then we are trusting in materialism to give us significance. Significance through materialism has become an idol.

We can also be tempted to be defined by our occupation or accomplishments. When these become our primary source of significance, our fulfillment can quickly turn to despair through a company downsizing, obsolete knowledge, retirement or illness. When we trust in the significance that is ours through Christ rather than in our performance, then, as our accomplishments fade away (and they

eventually will), our heart will be able to continue to “love the Lord our God”, because the object of our worship is not placed in temporal things.

We must be on guard for the idol of admiration. Our service and ministry to others can be performed in order to receive admiration or recognition. Even the expression of the love we have for our children or grandchildren can become an idol if the primary motivation for that love is to receive admiration for ourselves. We become the object of worship as we trust in ourselves and our service to others to satisfy our needs. Though paved with good intentions, this road can lead to difficulties in our relationships if we do not receive the appreciation that we think we deserve. If we seek love by pleasing people, and their opinion becomes more valuable to us than God's opinion, we live under the yoke of performance-based acceptance, which isn't the kind of love that God offers.

This kind of idolatry enslaves us and we can become someone that God never intended us to be. As a result, we can be tempted to live out of a false identity. We are not true to ourselves or true to the personality that God intended for us. He created us with certain gifts, talents, and capacities, and knows that if we hide or bury them to please other people, we will miss His best for us and may live to fill a gap that is insatiable. The results may be the emotional amputation of our true feelings. We may be living in numbness of an overwhelming pain. The idol of false love must go!

How do we uncover hidden idols? As we examine our interior motives, it is important to ask ourselves some diagnostic questions: What would happen if no one noticed us? What if no one was impressed by what we had or what we could do (especially for them)? What if we didn't receive praise from people for a job well done? What if we were satisfied in knowing that truly our lives are lived for the eyes of the Father, for sweet communion with Him, and we saw all encouragement and praise that we receive as coming directly from Him?

It is very important to think about what we do when we are dissatisfied. When there is a gap between dissatisfaction and contentment, what do we do to fill the hollow spaces in our souls? Do we seek pleasure, have an affair, surf the Internet, eat a pan of brownies, or turn on the television? In what do we trust and to whom do we turn in order to give us what we need? Whatever it may be, we must be aware that we may be chasing an idol. God knows that these things will never satisfy us, which is why Jesus said: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (the necessities of food, clothing and shelter) will be given to you as well.”⁵ Love and significance are found in God first, but that concept is often elusive. We chase the tangible rather than the invisible, the temporal rather than the eternal. We focus on our reality versus God's reality because it is often more satisfying, at least superficially and for a season.

How do we guard against these hidden idols? We must continue to keep our priorities straight. C.S. Lewis put it this way:

“You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.”⁶

Yes, we can enjoy our relationships, our vocations, wealth, or health as long as they don't take precedence over our love for God, as long as they stay in second place, as long as we don't rely on them for our primary source of significance and love. Undercover idols don't stay hidden. Our actions speak louder than words. When we have set our hearts upon the wrong things, and our second

things have slipped into first place, our internal thoughts will be exposed through our actions. Our idols become visible for all to see, even though we may think we are hiding them.

According to Romans 12:1, the apostle Paul urges us: "...brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Our bodies are to be living sacrifices. Our love for God becomes visible. Unlike the physical sacrifices of the Old Testament and the tangible sacrifices we offer today in monetary tithes and offerings, our bodies are living sacrifices—our very lives—to be offered up to the Lord for His will and good pleasure. It is a way of life produced from the realities of God's great mercy upon us. What we do with our lives—our time, our resources, and our bodies—is an indication of the object of our worship.

What do you do with your hands? Are they busy doing things that give you glory or do they give God glory? Where do your feet go? Are they quick to run to sinful behavior, or are they busy taking you where God leads? And what about your ears...are you listening to voices and sounds and influences that make you want to worship the created rather than the Creator? And what praise comes out of your mouth? "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him."⁷ Whom are you glorifying? What influences are permeating your mind? Do secular books, television shows, or movies draw your thoughts into more self-serving attitudes and desires? Do these influences move you closer to the heart of God or farther away? If the answer is farther away, you may be wrestling with an idol. Anything we want in lieu of what God wants can become an idol.

To present ourselves as living sacrifices, we must trust the One whom we love. We can deepen our trust of God as we hear and see Him revealed through His Word, and as we listen to the Spirit as He teaches us through the experiences of our lives. Mistrust in God leads to trust in ourselves or the things of this world—and that is idolatry.

May we be on the alert for the subtle idols that lead to destruction and may we be increasingly obedient to the prompting of the Spirit when God asks us to walk away from our idolatry. May God grant us the proper perspective of the good things He has given us to enjoy, not setting our hearts on them, but rather, receiving them with thanksgiving. May we truly love the Lord and serve Him with our whole heart. May He grant us the grace we need each day to run from the things that will capture our hearts.

¹ Deuteronomy 10:13

² Exodus 23:32–33

³ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁴ Matthew 7:13–14

⁵ Matthew 6:33

⁶ *God in the Dock*, by C.S. Lewis, page 490.

⁷ Matthew 12:33–35

Personal Reflection

Take time to reflect upon your thoughts in this lesson. Journal. Pray. Engage God!

1. Where do you find your primary sense of significance? If you truly find your primary significance in Christ, then list secondary sources of significance.
2. Where do you find your primary sense of being loved? If you truly find your source of love coming from God, then list your secondary sources of love.
3. What temptations do you face when the things you have listed above, both significance and love, are threatened?
4. What do you do to satisfy your needs when you are feeling insignificant or unlovable?
5. What would God have to do in these two areas of your life to cause you to trust Him more?
6. Write a prayer of confession, of denouncement of idolatry (if any), and of worship and adoration to Him.

"I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His (God's) invention, not ours (the demons). He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy (God) has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it's better style. To get the man's soul and give him nothing in return—that is what really gladdens Our Father's (Satan's) heart."

The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis, pages 41–42.

Engagement

Take time to think through these questions. Jot down some thoughts and discuss them with your journey companion.

1. What does the broad road feel like to you?
2. The narrow road is confining. What would be sad to lose as you walk the narrow road?
3. What would you sense internally if no one noticed you today? What would your response be?
4. Can you identify any idols in your life? If so, what are they?
5. How can you demolish them? (2 Corinthians 10:3–5)

Additional Resources

Conformed to His Image by Kenneth Boa
The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis