

Finding and replacing your idols

Col 3:1-5

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We have come to the final week in our series on counterfeit gods. Last week we looked at Jacob wrestling with God for his blessing. And we saw that deepening our relationship with God is the true way eliminate worship of fake gods. Jacob was never going to replace his desire for his father's affection or his desire for Rachel's beauty, or his desire for large flocks and herds, unless he replaced those desires with a desire for God himself. And so he wrestled with God for his blessing. Not for the earthly blessings that God might bestow, but to be called a much loved child of God. To know the affection of his heavenly father, and to have the measureless riches of experiencing his grace. For me, that's the climax. Is there another sermon in the series?

Well it seems that there is. In addition to the big picture of making sure our love for God so directs our lives that there is no room for idols, there is also the day to day grind of looking into our hearts, finding what our idols are and ejecting them from enslaving us.

Martin Luther said that idolatry lies behind all sin. So if you've sinned, and we all do, every day, then the reason for that sin is an idol somewhere. Luther said that is why in the ten commandments, the first commandment is first. Do you remember the first commandment? "You shall have no other gods before me."

Before any commands about murder or honouring your parents,
there is the command not to have idols.
How does idolatry lie behind all other sins?
Suppose you do something wrong.
Let's say you tell a lie.
Why did you tell that lie?
You might have told the lie
so the other person would think more highly of you,
that would be turning other people's approval into an idol.
You might have told the lie for some kind of financial advantage.
"Yes those bills are all work related and therefore tax deductible."
That would be worshiping wealth as an idol.
Behind every sin lies an idol.

But it's actually more than at the individual level.
Idols also create sinful cultures.
In the Bible, turning away from idols
includes rejecting the culture that the idols produce.
In the book of Acts, chapter 19,
who is it that opposes Paul's preaching against idolatry?
The chap's name is Demetrius the silversmith.
Why does he take particular issue with Paul's preaching
and incite the crowd to riot?
Because if people turn away from idols,
there goes most of the business of the local silversmith.
In our own culture, who is the greatest opponent of Christianity?
Well in our state parliament,
it would have to be the prostitute turned politician Fiona Patten.
Why does she hate Christianity so much?
Well if our preaching caused people to reject the idolatry of sex,
then prostitutes would be out of a job.
Now you would be quite right in saying,
that our preaching is never going put prostitutes out of a job.
In twenty years of Christian ministry,
I've only seen one man repent of visiting prostitutes.
But even so, just exposing the idol

will bring the hatred of its worshippers to the surface.

How can we work out what our idols are?

Because idolatries change the culture to make themselves appear normal, they can be very difficult to spot.

Here are 4 ways to spot your idols.

1. Check your daydreams.

When you have a quiet moment, and you are day dreaming away, what are your daydreams about?

Is it about some stuff you would like to buy?

Is it about a holiday destination?

A promotion you would like to get?

Roles of influence for your children or grandchildren?

A person you would like to marry?

Well you have to daydream about something.

But if your imagination is always running to the same topic, it might be an idol in your heart.

2. Check how you spend your money.

Mt 6:21 Jesus said,

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Australians spend more on their pets than they give to charity.

That tells you what we value as a nation.

Some churches talk about the importance of mission and give very little towards it.

I'm very privileged to be the minister of a church that is generous in its support of mission.

A few years ago when our older children were still at school, we were spending more on music lessons than we were giving to Christian ministries.

That should have provoked some tough questions about whether classical music is an idol for me.

3. Check how you responded to prayer requests when God says no.

It's normal to be disappointed

when God's plans for the world are different to our plans.

We know in our heads that he knows best.
But we do like getting our own way, don't we?
The problem comes
when your response to not getting what you ask for is anger or despair,
then those things may have become idols to you.
I'm sure I've told the story before of a friend
who was ready to give up her faith if she couldn't have a baby.
That would be a sign of idolatry.

4. Check your strong emotions.
It might be anger.
If your children's bad behaviour
makes you a whole lot more angry in public than it does it private,
it might be that your public reputation is an idol.
I was preaching to myself of 10 years ago there.
But there are other strong emotions.
It could be fear.
Do you wait in trepidation for test results to come back from the doctor?
Your health could be an idol.
It could be guilt.
Are you unable to move past the guilt
of something you repented of long ago,
of something you've said sorry to God for a hundred times.
It could be that living up to your parents expectations of you is an idol.
And sometimes if your parents have died,
they aren't even there to tell you that you are doing OK.
But human parents opinions of us
have to come a distant second to God's opinion.
And if God says you are forgiven,
that's the end of the matter.

So there's a few hints about spotting your idols.

Now the hard part.

Replacing your idols.

Writing to the Colossians, Paul wants them to get rid of their idols.

3:5 "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:
sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires,

and greed which is idolatry.
He explicitly labels greed as idolatry.
I'm pretty sure he is not by that saying
that lust for example is not idolatry.
But rather that everyone can see that lust is idolatry,
but greed is more socially acceptable,
and can slip under the radar.
But it too is idolatry.
Paul wants us to put all of our idols to death.
How are we going to do that?

Paul gives an example of what not to do,
and then an example of what to do.
The what not to do is in the second half of Colossians 2.
To summarize it in a sentence,
try to get rid of your idols by constructing a whole lot of religious rules.
2:16 "Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink,
or with regard to a religious festival,
a new moon celebration or a Sabbath day."
Clearly there were people
trying regulate the Christian lives of the Colossians.

And you can see the superficial attractiveness of rules.
Stop yourself worshipping money
by delineating a significant amount that you are required to give.
Stop yourself making food and drink an idol
by setting up rules that enable you to eat enough for survival,
but not enough to indulge in gluttony or drunkenness.
Make sure work doesn't become an idol
by ensuring that you turn up to church
and a whole bunch of other religious celebrations that we will mandate.
Rules will kill your idols.
Is that going to work?
It will fail in one of two ways.
Either you will keep the rules,
and the works based righteousness will itself become an idol.

You'll end up like the Pharisees.

That's not very attractive.

It can also fail in another way.

Paul describes this in Romans 7

using the example of the idol of possessions.

Rom 7:7-8 "For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had said not said,

"You shall not covet."

But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting."

Our religious rules can actually make sin more attractive.

By forcing our minds to focus on what we aren't allowed to do, rules just increase our temptation.

If you want to put to death your idols, rules ain't going to do it for you.

Paul sums it up this way in Col 2:23,

"Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self imposed worship, their false humility and harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."

So what is the right alternative?

Paul continues in the next verse and the first verse we read today,

3:1 "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,

set your hearts on things above, where Christ is,

seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things above,

not on earthly things."

How are we going to put to death our idols?

By setting our hearts and minds on things above.

It can sound a bit vague and lacking in substance.

What am I going to do

when the temptation to worship money or my job comes along?

I know.

I'll sit down and imagine what heaven is going to be like.
That should take away the temptation.
Doesn't sound realistic, does it?
But it's not vague imaginings that we are to set our hearts and minds on.
It's the very concrete hope of the gospel.
It's the joy we have in what Christ has done for us.
So if I'm thinking about how I have an eternity to spend
in a restored creation,
where I have every blessings in Christ,
then that should help me
to avoid making too much of my possessions in this world.
I can't take them with me,
and in the next world,
I will have everything I could desire.
If I'm tempted to make an idol of my family,
then I can think about the new creation.
In the new creation, all of God's children will be my family.
And my loving relationships with all of them will bring me great joy.
If I were tempted to make an idol of my good looks.
Now you understand that this is completely hypothetical,
I'm preaching to all of you not just myself.
If I were tempted to make an idol of my good looks,
then I know that in the new creation,
I will be a reflection of the beauty of the Lord Jesus.
Not really much point in getting obsessed with a gym membership now.
This body is not getting any younger.
And the one I'm getting in the new creation will never age.

Setting you hearts and minds on things above isn't airy fairy.
It's applying the concrete truths of what God is doing
to break down my obsession with things of this world.

Everyone needs something to love.
We will all set our affections on something.
That's why it's no good uprooting idols
unless you have the love of God to put in their place.

If you uproot idols with nothing to replace them with,
they will grow back.

We need to plant the love of Christ when we uproot our idols.
Otherwise the idol will grow back.

Keller says, "Rejoicing and repentance must go together.
Repentance by itself will lead to despair."
Jesus said, "repent and believe the good news".

There are two reasons you might repent of your idols.
Out of fear or out of love.

Repentance out of fear looks like this.

"I better turn away from this idol
otherwise I will face the judgement of God."

It's true.

But it doesn't teach us to hate idolatry.

It only teaches us to hate being punished for it.

Repentance out of love looks like this.

"Look at how much it cost Jesus to save me from this idol.

My idolatry caused him to pay that much.

My idolatry caused his pain.

I really don't like this idol."

Paul tells the Philippians,

"Rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again, rejoice!"

Rejoicing in the Lord and setting your hearts on things above
sound pretty similar to me.

And there's a very good reason
to replace our idols with rejoicing in the Lord.

Many of our idols are good things.

The people we love:

your family, your friends.

Our possessions are a good gift of God.

Work is a blessing from God that enables us to be creative like him.

Positions of influence in the community
are an opportunity to be a blessing to others.
We don't actually want to love our family less.
That's not the way to uproot that idol.
Instead of decreasing our love for our family,
if we increase our love for the Lord Jesus,
then we can uproot the idol and continue in our love for our family.

And in that way,
what we are doing here today
can help uproot our idols
without us even thinking about it.
We gather today to worship God.
We gather to set our minds on things above.
Maybe for you, your heart will be moved to rejoice as you sing.
Maybe you will be moved to rejoice
as we gather around the Lord's table.
Maybe you are like me,
and it's easier for you to set your mind on things above than your heart.
You might even be moved to rejoicing by the sermon.
That wasn't a joke,
no need to laugh.
As we meet together to worship God,
the love of God that it stirs in our hearts
will help to uproot idols.
Even without you thinking about it.
It's just God quietly at work in you by his Spirit.

There's another way to think about replacing idols in verse 3.
"For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."
Paul is speaking to people who are still alive.
Yet he says, "For you died".
He means that their old self,
their worldly self,
the self that is captured and controlled by idols died.
When did that happen?

When they put their faith in Christ.
And now, their lives are wrapped up with the Lord Jesus.
They are alive because they are united to Christ and Christ is alive.
That's the reality.
Is Paul naive about how they actually are?
Not a bit.
He wouldn't be telling them to put to death their idols
if he thought it was all fixed when they put their faith in Christ.
But he's telling them what the reality is.
He's saying, focus on the reality.
That will help deal with the left over mess of your sinful humanity.

Maybe an illustration from Queen Elizabeth
would be appropriate today.
Queen Elizabeth became Queen in 1952.
Was she 100% the queen the day after her father died?
Yes she was.
That was the reality.
But do you think she felt like the queen the day after her father died?
Or do you think it took time for her to feel fully queen?
I have no doubt that it took time for her grow into the role.
Possibly the coronation service in 1953
would have helped to make it real.
But no doubt even after that she would have had days
when she just felt like the girl
who played in the palace gardens as a child.
What would help her to feel like the queen?
Just to focus her mind on the reality.
I am the queen.
That is the role God has given me.
If you focus on the reality,
eventually your feelings catch up.
Here the reality is that our old selves have died.
In 2:12, Paul says you were buried with Christ in baptism
and raised from the dead with him in his resurrection.
That is your reality.

You died.

You were raised.

It happened in the past.

And now, concentrating on the reality
will assist you in putting to death your idols.

They are not part of the new you.

Even if they do hang around a bit.

Let's pray that God would enable us to find and replace our idols.