

Hidden idols

Jonah 4

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We've been spending some time over the last few weeks looking at trying to remove the idols from our lives.

We've looked at such idols as children, love, money, success, and power.

These idols are relatively easy to spot because they relate to external things in the world around us.

But there are other idols that are harder to spot because we are worshiping something in our own internal attitudes or psychological desires.

These are harder to spot.

But I would go as far as to say that we all have them to some extent. And they don't honour God.

So it's right that we spend some time working on recognising them and eliminating them through the help of the Holy Spirit.

For Christians, the worst of our hidden idols are idols to do with our faith.

Let me mention three of them.

1. Right doctrine.

Don't get me wrong here.

Right doctrine is tremendously important.

I've recently attended a conference

where the key issues discussed

were how to deal with wrong doctrine,

how to establish new oversight for churches

where wrong doctrine has become dominant in their diocese,

and how much damage is being done to the body of Christ by wrong doctrine.

I'm all in favour of right doctrine.

But right doctrine can become an idol.

We can wind up worshipping our theological correctness instead of worshipping God.

We can wind up more excited about our creeds and confessions of faith than we are by relationship with the Lord Jesus.

We can wind up happier basking in the presence of our mates who are decrying falsehood with us than we are basking in the presence of Almighty God.

But it's a tricky idol, isn't it?

All of us should have a concern for right doctrine. Wrong doctrine perverts our understanding of God, it harms the people and the churches that believe it. It's not about getting 13/20 instead of 18/20 on a test. You know, OK maybe I could have done better, but I've passed and I'll get to go to heaven, so who really cares?

It's not like that.

If our understanding of God gets twisted, people will be driven to believe things that will separate themselves and others from God. It has eternal consequences. It's very serious.

But if we turn it into an idol, that's serious as well.

That's also going to have eternal consequences.

So how will we recognise if right doctrine has become an idol? Here are two ways.

Right doctrine has likely become an idol if you become a mocker. If you are mocking people who disagree with you, rather than gently trying to win them over, then you aren't acting out of love.

Psalm one says,
'blessed is the one who does not sit in the company of mockers.'

Proverbs 22 says,
'drive out the mocker and out goes strife, quarrels and insults are ended.'

If we show contempt and disdain for opponents instead of graciousness then we are being mockers.

If we show contempt for other people

then we have forgotten that we are sinners who are utterly reliant on God's grace.

Here's the second way you can recognise if right doctrine has become an idol.

People with the doctrine idol are unable to separate important issues from less important or even trivial issues.

Yes it's worth getting very worked up about the resurrection of Jesus, about the authority of the scriptures, about the atonement that is, what Jesus death on the cross achieves.

But if you are getting all worked up

about whether we have communion wine in a chalice or out of individual cups,

or how much water gets used in Baptism,

or whether the days of creation are 24 hour periods,

or whether an Anglican Church is recognised by the Archbishop of Canterbury

or by the head archbishops

of Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda and eight others acting as a group,

let the listener understand,

you've lost perspective.

When you get worked up about things that don't matter, it's the sign of an idol.

That's the idol of right doctrine.

2. The second religious idol is ministry success.

This is more prevalent amongst ministers than their congregations, so I'll treat it briefly.

It's very important that our ministries are effective, right?

Not much point running a playgroup if no one turns up or a youth group if no one turns up.

Not much point running an Op Shop if no one buys anything from it.

Not much point running Sunday services if no one wants to attend them.

But are you a better Christian if more people come to your youth group?

Are you a better Christian if your Op shop sales double?

The answer is no.

Look, if you could find a young version of Peter Adam

and make him your minister,
you would get twice as many people coming along
as with me as your minister.

That's just a sad reality.

Humanly speaking, success depends on leadership.

And if you believe in what you are doing,
that makes good leadership very important.

But it's also possible to make an idol out of ministry success.

If you fall victim to this idol,
then you will confuse spiritual gifts
with the fruit of the spirit.

Spiritual gifts are the skills and talents
that enable effective service in the kingdom of God.

The fruit of the Spirit is the results of the Spirit changing our character
to make us more like Jesus.

If you have Spiritual gifts without Spiritual fruit,
then ministry success will become an idol.

And if you've followed
some of the mega church blow ups in the last couple of years,
the results of that will be all too painfully familiar.

In the secular world they have a saying,

"You get hired for competence and fired for character."

The Christian ministry blows ups have all been about character.

Mars Hill, Ravi Zacharias, Jonathan Fletcher.

All had great spiritual gifts
and all blew up because of character failings.

That's the idol of ministry success.

3. The third religious idol is moral living.

Now again, don't get me wrong here.

The moral and ethical framework of the Bible is the best way to live.

It pleases God and it works out in the world.

The reason it works out in the world

is because God made the world,

and he gave us a moral framework

that would work in the world that he made.

So living that way is right and good.
But, like all good things, it can become an idol.
The great reformer, Martin Luther used to tell Christians to 'sin boldly'.
That's a shocking thing for a Christian leader to say, isn't it?
What did he mean?
He didn't mean you should go and boldly look for ways to sin.
But he'd come out of life as an Augustinian monk.
They used to spend hours a day
trying to strain the last little bit of sin out of their lives.
Their days were filled with confessions and penance.
But let's think about it,
why do people sin?
Because they think it is going to feel good.
So if you spend your life beating up on yourself about sin,
you are going to make yourself feel bad.
And when you feel bad, how do you want to feel?
You want to feel good, don't you?
And that just makes sin all the larger temptation.
Because it will be that much easier for the devil
to convince you to do something that might make you feel better.
For a short period of time,
then sin will get out it's nasty claws and hurt you.
So Luther's antidote to the idol of moral living
was to tell Christians to sin boldly.
That is, go and live your life following Jesus.
When you slip up, tell God that you are sorry,
but don't beat up on yourself.
Just go on your way trying to serve
and trust that Jesus has paid the penalty for you on the cross.

If you think you need some help with the idol of moral living,
I would encourage you to come along to Trinity Tucker.
Don't come if you want to prove your moral superiority
by helping the unfortunate.
That would be to have an idol of moral living.
But do come if you recognise that God has sent these people along

so that we can get practice in loving and welcoming people like he does.
God has sent these people along to help us untangle
what are Christian expectations and what are middle class expectations.
You know we often confuse the two.

OK that's our three hidden idols.

Don't complain that the sermon had no application.

The application was front loaded at the start.

Now let's turn to Jonah.

Jonah is a great example in the Bible
of someone afflicted by religious idols.

Not statues of Baal,

but understandings of his faith

that were warped by his idolatrous attitudes.

Sometimes Christian people think

that Jonah might not have been a real person.

This might be a story made up to tell us some spiritual truths.

If you are suffering from insomnia,

you could read scholars carrying on at great length about that.

They just seem to miss engaging with a crucial piece of evidence.

2 Kings 14:23-25

"In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah,
Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria,
and he reigned 41 years. ...

He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel

from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea,

in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel,

spoken through his prophet Jonah son of Amittai,

the prophet from Gath Hopher."

No question that Jonah was a real bloke,

and if you don't believe

someone can survive inside a fish for three days,

You can go up to Eden in southern NSW

and read the plaque dedicated to the 19th Century whaler

who was swallowed by a whale,

and vomited up some days later.

Jonah was a real bloke but what kind of a real bloke was he?
Well he lived in a time of God's patience.
His king was an evil King.
But he reigned for 41 years,
now that's not as much as queen Elizabeth II,
but understand those kings led their armies personally into battle,
and they didn't have modern medicine.
41 year was a phenomenal reign
and he grew the nation's borders to their peak.
You could say that Jeroboam II had competence but not character.
And Jonah supported his king.
He prophesied that the borders would enlarge
as the king led the armies out to battle.
Probably fair to infer from this
that Jonah had the religious nationalism idol.
He was prepared to overlook evil in a king
in order to support 'the growth of God's Kingdom'.

Well if you've got the religious nationalism idol,
what do you think about people from opposing countries?
You hate them, don't you?
And that is what lies behind the problems Jonah faced in the book.
Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.
This was the nation that was the greatest military threat to Israel.
So what is Jonah thinking
when God tells him to go and preach repentance to the Ninevites?
1. You are asking me to be a lone Jewish prophet
walking into the heart of an enemy city.
They won't listen and I will be a failure.
I'd much rather prophesy to the king of Israel
that he's going to win a battle.
You get a more appreciative audience that way.
That would be the ministry success idol.
2. I don't want Nineveh to repent anyway.
If they repent, then God won't judge them.
And I want God to judge them

because they are our enemies.
That's the religious nationalism idol.
3. These are a wicked people with dissolute lives.
They don't deserve God's grace.
I shouldn't have to do ministry amongst them.
That's the moral living idol.

It turns out that it wasn't just the Ninevites
who needed to repent of their sins.
God's prophet needed to repent also.
He needed to repent of his hidden religious idols.
And so God was very kind to Jonah.
Instead of leaving him stuck in his sin,
he sent along a storm and a large fish.
And with a bit of time for serious reflection,
Jonah was able to turn his heart back to God.
Listen to his lovely words from inside the belly of the fish.

Jon 2:8-9

"Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.
But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.
what I have vowed, I will make good.
I will say, "Salvation comes from the Lord."
Those sound like the words of a thoroughly repentant man, don't they?

And Jonah looks repentant.
When God tells him a second time to go and preach to the Ninevites,
off he goes.
He preaches to the Ninevites.
And they respond to his preaching.
And they turn away from their worthless idols.
The repent and humbly come before God asking for forgiveness.
It sounds like a happy ending.
But it turns out that Jonah was only happy
to preach about how God was going to judge Nineveh

if God actually judged Nineveh.
He believed that 'Salvation comes from the Lord'
he just didn't want it to come to Nineveh.
His religious idols were still there.
In particular his religious nationalism
had obliterated any desire he might have had
for the Ninevites to respond to God's grace.
And so he chucked an absolute tantrum.
This is a roll around on the floor punching the ground level tantrum.
Not only is it just the wrong thing to do.
It's disproportionately over the top wrong.
I mean he could have said,
"Well, it's not what I wanted to have happened.
I would have preferred
you actually judge them like you said you would God.
But I'll just head back to Israel now and get on with my life."
But Jonah did the 'I'm so angry I want to die' routine.
What's going on here?
When your emotional reaction to something is off the scale
in terms of how much you should be reacting,
that's a sure sign that one of your idols is being poked.
It's always a good question to ask,
when you feel yourself reacting too strongly,
"Which of my idols has got under my skin this time?"
Extreme emotional reactions are a great diagnostic tool for idols.

But how kind is God?
I mean God could have said,
"You're not much of a prophet are you?
I had to send a big fish to fetch you back from Tarshish.
I would have thought you would have got with the program.
But now you are whining and complaining
when the Ninevites repent and avoid judgement.
I'll find somebody else to carry my prophetic messages next time."
But no.
God is patiently bearing with his recalcitrant prophet.

He sends him the lived out parable of the vine growing and dying.
It's all about God patiently educating his prophet in his ways.
Jonah stuffs up and stuffs up,
and God keeps patiently trying to teach him.

Isn't that just so encouraging?

You might be a bit of a slow learner too,

I know I am.

God's patience with Jonah is a sign of his patience with you and me.
That's so reassuring for slow learners.

By the end of the book,
we still don't know how Jonah responded to this final lesson.

Does he say to God,

"Ok then, I get it.

If I can care about a vine,

I guess you are allowed to care about a city of 120K people."?

Or does he keep chucking his tantrum?

We don't know.

The author keeps it hanging in the air.

The story is unfinished.

I'm sure that's intentional.

Because in the end,

this is as much a story about us, the readers as it is about Jonah.

How are we going to respond when God pokes our idols?

Here's how we should respond.

We should pray a prayer like this.

"Lord God, you are the only God.

These idols that I sometimes worship are no gods at all.

I'd love to say I have the strength and discipline to cast aside my idols,
but unfortunately that wouldn't be true.

So please do what you've promised to do.

Be kind to me like you were kind to Jonah.

Keep giving lessons to this slow learner.

By the power of your Holy Spirit

please enable me to learn and grow from the lessons that you send me."