PART I. IDENTIFYING IDOLS PROJECT

Read, mark, discuss following

“!” for something that helped you

“?” for something that raised a question

A. THE DEFINITION OF IDOLS (What they are).

Romans 1:25 tells us that idols are not sinful things, but **good and basic things elevated into being ultimate things** (v.25—worshipped...created things rather than the Creator). We look to them for meaning in life, for covering our sense of insignificance, for developing a “righteousness” or worth.

“An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that...is central in my life, anything that seems to me...essential...An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend, anything that...holds such a controlling position in my life that...it moves and rouses and attracts so much of my time and attention, my energy and money.” —D.M. Lloyd-Jones, “Idolatry” in *Life in God: Studies in 1 John*

“The virtues on which the mind preens itself as giving control over the body and its urges, and which aim at any other purpose or possession than God, are in point of fact vices rather than virtues.” —Augustine, *City of God*, Chap. 19:25

“[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts...All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like...When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main ‘idol’] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets which bring supply...this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort...” —Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*

B. THE MOTIVATION FOR IDOLS (Why we have them).

Romans 1:21 tells us that the reason we make idols is because **we want control of our lives** (v.21—though they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave him thanks).

“Sin predisposes us to want to be independent of God, to be laws unto ourselves or autonomous, so that we can do what we want without bowing to His authority. At the most basic level, idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world—if we do not want to face the face of God Himself in his majesty and holiness. Rather than look to the Creator and have to deal with his lordship, we orient our lives toward the creation, where we can be more free to control and shape our lives...” —Timothy Keller, *Understanding Your Heart*
in our desired directions...since we were made to relate to God, but do not want to face Him [and let him control and shape us], thus we forever inflate things in the world to religious proportions to fill the vacuum left by God’s exclusion...We do not just eliminate God, but we erect God-substitutes in his place.” —R. Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in No God but God

C. THE MOTIVATION FROM IDOLS (How they affect us.)

1. **Distorted thinking.**
Romans 1:21 tells us each idol creates a delusional field, a whole set of assumptions and false definitions of success and failure which are distortions of reality brought on by the idol (v.21— their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened).

“[Your] idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God’s definitions. [They spin out a whole false belief system.] They establish a locus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g. lust for money), other people (e.g. ‘I need to please my father’), or myself (e.g. attainment of my personal goals). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of values and stigma. Idols promise blessings and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail [their standards]. ‘If I [make enough money]...if I get these certain people to like and respect me, then my life will be valid.’” —David Powlison

2. **Emotional bondage.**
Romans 1:25 tells us that each idol “darkens the heart” and enslaves us (v.25—worshipped and served created things). Whatever we worship we must serve. The way the idol enslaves is that it creates over-desires, inordinate longings.

“Idols of the heart are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1-8...If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘lust’ [inordinate desires], epithumiai, is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James in Gal. 5:16ff; Eph. 2:3, 4:22; 1 Pet. 2:11, 4:2; 1 John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where epithumiai is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against ‘coveting’, which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]...also...makes sin ‘psychodynamic’. It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7...the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires...for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph. 5:5 and Colossians 3:5). —David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

3. **The sin under every sin.**
The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.

“The greatest danger and enemy that confronts us is not a matter of deeds or of actions, but of idolatry...That may sound very strange to some. Some think that above all we need to be warned not to do certain things...But our deeds and actions are always the outcome
of our attitudes and thoughts. So John takes the same procedures as the 10 commandments. All the Scriptures always start like this, they always say, start here—the great danger is idolatry.” D.M. Lloyd-Jones, “Idolatry” in *Life in God: Studies in 1 John.*

“The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under it’s own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry...[All murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God—yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for its unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry.” —Tertullian, *On Idolatry Chap. I*

This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong.* Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is “because we are weak and sinful,” but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.

**Summary:**

1. **Unbelief**
   
   We know God but we reject him as God and seek to be our own God and Savior.  
   
   Romans 1:21—*Though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

2. **Unrighteousness**
   
   Result: Fear and a sense of spiritual “nakedness”—a loss of “righteousness,” a sense of shame and unworthiness.  
   
   Genesis 3:7—*Then...they realized they were naked, so they...made coverings for themselves.*

3. **Idolatry**
   
   Therefore: We serve created things instead, to maintain our independence from God, yet to still replace the lost worth—“righteousness.”  
   
   Romans 1:25—*They...worshipped “gods” and served created things rather than the creator.*

4. **Lie System**
   
   Deep in us is a false belief system, centered on idol(s), that something besides God provides us with worth and satisfaction.  
   
   Romans 1:21, 25—*21 So their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...25 they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.*

3
5. Slavery

Whatever we worship, we serve. Since we must have the things we serve to “cover” our unworthiness, they drive us to over-effort to get them and fill us with fear and anger if circumstances jeopardize them. If we fail to attain them, they punish us with terrible self-loathing. Therefore everyone is in “covenant” service to a “lord” that works its will out through our bodies. (Rom. 6:16-19)

Even after conversion, our old false saviors/lords have continued power. Though we intellectually deny them, our hearts still functionally acknowledge them unless the Holy Spirit renews us (Romans 7:14-25). Our fear, anger, and habits still arise from false saviors that we still deeply feel we must have for our value. So the key is uprooting residual, left-over self-salvation systems. Sin only masters us if we let these old idols continue to force us to “earn our salvation” through them. (Rom. 6:14—Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.)

ASSIGNMENT: “IDENTIFYING YOUR IDOLS”

A. Using “Problem Emotions” to identify idols.

Read the following excerpts from Thomas C. Oden, Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia, chapter 6. (Comments in brackets ([ ]) are from Keller.)

1. Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living. A value is anything good in the created order—any idea, relation, object, or person in which one has an interest, from which one derives significance.

2. These values compete…In time, one is prone to choose a center of value by which other values are judged…[which] comes to exercise power or preeminence over other values.

3. When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen…a god…One has a god when a finite value is…viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully. (To be worshipped as a god, something must be sufficiently good…Were my daughter not a source of exceptional affection and delight, she would not be a potential idol for me, but I am tempted to adore her in a way…disproportional.)

Anxiety [Idolatry and the future]

4. Anxiety becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values. Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths.
Guilt/Bitterness [Idolatry and the past]
5. Guilt become neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values. Suppose I value my ability to teach and communicate clearly. If clear communication has become an absolute value for me, a center of value that makes all my other values valuable...then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt.
6. [Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.]

Boredom/Emptiness [Idolatry and the present]
7. To be bored is to feel empty, [meaningless]. Boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries...[when any of those values are lost], boredom becomes pathological and compulsive...My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos...This picture of the self is called despair. [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism.]

Answer the following:

a. If you are angry: Ask, “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry—because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

b. If you are fearful or badly worried: Ask, “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared—because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

c. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask, “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so ‘down’—because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:
B. Using “Motivational Drives” to identify idols. (The “far-idols”)

Read:

“An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as a substitute for God. All sorts of things are potential idols…An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero…If this is so, how do we determine when something is…an idol?

1. As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol…
   ■ Work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one’s family are ignored.
   ■ Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside one’s own family is cared for.
   ■ Being well liked, a perfectly legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means one never risks disapproval.

2. [Idols] are inflated…suggesting that the idol will fulfill the promises for the good life…Idols tend to come in pairs—[for example] a nearby idol may be a rising standard of living, but the faraway idol is a semi-conscious belief that material success will wipe away every tear…”

—Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in No God but God

“...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: “has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? Questions bring some of people’s idol systems to the surface.

■ To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance?
■ What do you really want and expect [out of life]?
■ What would [really] make you happy?
■ What would make you an acceptable person?
■ Where do you look for power and success?

These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: Who or what rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?”

—David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

We often don’t go deep enough to analyze our idol-structures. For example, “money” is of course an idol, yet in another sense, money can be sought in order to satisfy very different, more foundational idols. For example, some people want lots of money in order to control their world and life (such people usually don’t spend their money, but save it), while others want lots of money for access to social circles and for making themselves beautiful and attractive (such people do spend money on themselves!). The same goes for sex. Some people use sex in order to get power over others, others in order to feel approved and loved, and others just for pleasure/comfort. The following outline can be helpful in letting people consider different foundational “idol-structures.” Dick Keyes calls them “far-idols” as
opposed to “near-idols.” Remember, these are all alternative ways to make ourselves “righteous/worthy”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Seek</th>
<th>Price Willing to Pay</th>
<th>Greatest Nightmare</th>
<th>Others Often Feel</th>
<th>Problem Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMFORT</strong></td>
<td>Reduced productivity</td>
<td>Stress, demands</td>
<td>Hurt</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Privacy, lack of stress, freedom)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPROVAL</strong></td>
<td>Less independence</td>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>Smothered</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Affirmation, love, relationship)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTROL</strong></td>
<td>Loneliness, spontaneity</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>Condemned</td>
<td>Worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Self-discipline, certainty, standards)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POWER</strong></td>
<td>Burdened, responsibility</td>
<td>Humiliation</td>
<td>Used</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Success, winning, influence)</td>
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Check the thoughts that are lodged in your heart:

- **Power Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I have power and influence over others.

- **Approval Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am loved and respected by _____________________.

- **Comfort Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life.”

- **Image Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I have a particular kind of look or body image.”

- **Control Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____________________.

- **Helping Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…people are dependant on me and need me.”

- **Dependence Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.”

- **Independence Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.”

- **Work Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am highly productive, getting a lot done.”

- **Achievement Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career.”

- **Materialism Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.

- **Religion Idolatry**: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if…I am adhering to my religious moral codes and accomplished in it activities.”
Individual Person Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...this one person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me.”

Irreligion idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality.”

Racial/cultural idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.”

Inner Ring Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.”

Family Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me.”

Relationship Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...Mr. or Mrs. ‘Right’ is in love with me.”

Suffering Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...I am hurting, in a problem—only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt.”

Ideology Idolatry: “Life only has meaning / I only have worth if...my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power.”

C. Using Diagnostic Questions to identify idols.

a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?

b. What, if I fail or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?

c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?

d. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What pre-occupies me?

e. What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?

f. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
g. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

D. Summary

What are the common themes from your answers to the questions/exercises above? Write below what you think are your “functional” masters. What things tend to be too important to you?
Part II. DISMANTLING IDOLS

Read, mark, discuss following “!” for something that helped you “?” for something that raised a question

A. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF IDOLS

1. The Universality of Idols.

The Bible does not consider idolatry to be a sin among many (and now a very rare sin only among primitive people). Rather, the only alternative to true, full faith in the living God is idolatry. All our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are due at root to idolatry—something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.

“At the end of Exodus 20-23, the Lord says... ‘You shall make no covenant with them [pagan peoples] or with their gods.’ [Paul says] unbelievers ‘worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator’ (Rom. 1:25). Man cannot escape his covenantal nature...worship and service are inseparable...[We must worship something—so we must serve something.] No more explicit statement of man’s allegiance to his idols could be made...Paul describes the unbeliever as one in slavery to sin (Rom. 6:16)...false service [or slavery] is thought of as emerging from a covenant with false gods. The warning against making a covenant with a false god presumes a comparison with the true covenant...in the Sinaitic covenant of Exodus 20 there is (A)The command to love. Exodus 20:3 demands: “you shall have no other gods before me”...(B)The sanctions: Exodus 20 promises blessings or curses depending on our response to the covenant. ...

Now unbelief is an expression of a covenant with idols...All sin involves idolatry in one way or another, although it may not be immediately obvious. Sin does not occur in a vacuum. Despite our inability to fathom the depth of sin, we can describe it more accurately once we recognize our covenantal nature. One’s life as an unbeliever is organized around idolatry...Any theory of [human nature] which discusses the ‘why’ aspect of behavior wrestles with the question of motivation. What [is a person really after? Why is he really after it?] A covenant servant expects blessings and avoids curses [by serving his god.] Without rooting our view of human nature in the covenant, we will not be able to adequately describe human motivation. We will only see a collection of desires rather than an expression of a comprehensive covenant.”

—Michael W. Bobick, From Slavery to Sonship: A Biblical Psychology For Pastoral Counseling

“A careful reading of the Old and New Testaments shows that idolatry is nothing like the crude, simplistic picture that springs to mind of an idol sculpture in some distant country. As the main category to describe unbelief, the idea is highly sophisticated, drawing together the complexities of motivation in individual psychology, the social environment, and also the unseen world. Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds (Ezekiel 14). The apostle associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). The
Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life...it is found on center stage.” —R. Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in No God but God

“The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry. But let me focus the question through a particular verse in the New Testament... ‘Beloved, keep yourselves from idols’ (I John 5:21). How does that command merit being the final word in a 105 verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God?...[Keeping oneself from idols sums up what vital fellowship with Jesus is.]... —David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

“[When does the pursuit of a legitimate goal become idolatry, or ‘ideology’?] An ideology arises the moment the end indiscriminately justifies every means...Thus a nation’s goal of material prosperity becomes an idol [the ideology of materialism] when we use it to justify the destruction of the environment or allow the abuse of individuals or classes of people. A nation’s goal of military security [becomes an idol [militarism] when we use it to justify the removal of free speech and judicial process, or the abuse of a minority.] —Bob Goodzwaard, Idols of Our Time

Idols are not just the basis for all personal problems, but for all social and cultural problems. When an individual serves an idol, it creates psychological distortion; when a family, a group, or a country serves an idol, it creates social and cultural trouble. The following are more obvious social-cultural idols:

- **Fascism** makes an idol out of one particular race or nationality. It occurs when a culture teaches individuals to say “I am acceptable because I am of the _______ race which is far better than _______ race(s).” This also tends to make an idol out of military might.

- **Communism** makes an idol of the state. It occurs when a culture teaches that all problems are at root social, not spiritual, and that government, not God, will solve them.

- **Capitalism** can be an idol when a society comes to believe that all our problems will be solved by free market competition. Capitalism as an idol leads people to “worship” success and change.

- **Relativism** makes an idol out of one’s own individual conscience and inner feelings. When a society teaches people “you alone can determine what is right or wrong for you, as long as you don’t steal others’ freedom to have the same choice,” then it has made “choice” an absolute value, and feelings of the heart a god.

- **Scientism** makes an idol out of reason and scientific investigation. It insists absolutely everything has a natural, scientific cause. Thus it believes science has an answer for everything and will open all doors.

**Sum:** At the root of all problems (personal or social), and of all non-Christian philosophies and ideologies is the elevation of some created thing to the place of ultimate worship and as the ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning.
2. The Formation of Idols

How do the particular idol-systems come to be formed in us? How do we come to have our specific idols?

The world, the flesh, and the devil (1 John 2:16-17) are inextricably linked in their influences to produce idols in us. First, our “flesh,” our sinful heart, is by nature an “idol factory” (as Calvin put it). Second, the “world,” our social environment, coaxes us to worship various idols by model and example and sometimes direct appeal. Our family’s idols, our culture’s idols, our class’s idols shape us either when we embrace them or reject them for the idol-opposite. Third, the “devil” works in us to stir up and enflame desires into idolatrous bondages. If we leave out any one of the three aspects, we will reduce behavior to either “Johnny is bad” or “Johnny is abused” or “Johnny is sick.” But all of these approaches are simplistic compared to the Bible. None of our behavior is simply the result of only (A) our inherent nature, (B) our environment, or (C) our free choice. The Bible is not essentialist (“he was born that way, it is hopeless”), behaviorist (“he is a victim of what they did to him, it’s hopeless”), or existentialist (“it’s all a matter of his choice; he can be whatever he wants to be!”).

“How do we put together the following three things? First, people are responsible for their behavioral sins...Second, people with problems come from families or sub-cultures where the other people involved also have problems. We suffer and are victimized and misguided by the destructive things other people think, want, fear, value, feel, and do...My problems are often embedded in a tight feedback loop with your problems...Third, behavior is motivated by complex, life-driving patterns of thoughts, desires, fears, views of the world, and the like, of which a person may be almost wholly unaware. How are we...responsible for our behavior [#1], socially conditioned [#2], and creatures whose hearts are twisted and complex all at the same time without any factor canceling out the others?

The social and behavioral sciences miss this...Human motivation is never strictly psychological [controlled primarily by my feelings] or psycho-social [controlled primarily by my environment] or psycho-social somatic[controlled primarily by my biological genetic code]. Human motivation is always God-relational [we are controlled primarily by what we worship]. Seeing this, the Bible’s view alone can unify the seemingly contradictory elements in the explanation of behavior.” —D. Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

“The things frequently labeled ‘co-dependency’ are more precisely instances of ‘co-idolatry’. People’s typical idol patterns often reinforce each other and fit in an uncanny way into a [single, large] idol system, creating massively destructive feedback loops. The classic alcoholic husband and rescuing wife are enslaved within an idol system whose components complement each other all too well:

1. The idol pattern in the husband...might be a use of alcohol (A) to serve an idol of escape from the pains and frustration of life, or (B)to serve an idol of self-crucifixion to deal with this periodic guilt and remorse.

2. The idol pattern in the wife...might be a use of rescuing behavior (A) to serve an idol of personal worth by being a martyred savior of her family, or (B)to serve an idol of security by having a male ’s love and dependence on her.
Each of their idols (and the consequent behavior, thoughts, and emotions) is ‘logical’ within the idol system...Idols counterfeit aspects of God’s identity and character...judge, savior, source of blessing, sin-bearer, object of trust...Each idol in the system ‘makes promises’ and ‘gives warnings’. Service to each idol results in a hangover of misery and accusedness, because idols lie and murder. They are continually insinuated by the one who was a liar and murderer from the beginning.”

Co-dependency literature often perceptively describes the patterns of dysfunctional idols which curse and enslave people (e.g. the rescuer or compulsive drinker). But the solution [in this same literature] is to offer different and presumably more workable idols, rather than the Bible’s Christ...Self-esteem...acceptance and love from new significant others, [better jobs and careers] create successful versions of the idols ‘fear of man’ and ‘trust of man’. Eufunctional idols do ‘work’ and ‘bless’ with temporary happy lives (Psalm 73)...but the idol system is intact...” —D. Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

“The idol begins as a means of power, enabling us to control, but then overpowers, controlling us.” —Richard Keyes, “The Idol Factory” in No God but God

Sum: Sin cannot simply be resisted at the volitional level through mere will power, but on the other hand, we are not helpless victims. Sin must primarily be rooted out at the motivational level through the application of gospel-truth. We must find what we worship as our functional savior through works-righteousness, in rejection of the gospel of free grace and salvation through Christ. Then we must repent and replace the idol with love and joy in Christ at the same time we are trying to change our behavior.

B. HEALING IDOLATRY WITH THE GOSPEL

1. The “Moralyzing” Approach.

Basic analysis: Your problem is that you are doing wrong. Repent!

This focuses on behavior—but doesn’t go deep enough. We must find out the why of our behavior. Why do I find I want to do the wrong things? What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) to ‘repent and change behavior’ is insufficient, because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, ‘even if you live up to moral standards, but you don’t have this, then you are still a failure.’ You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all—your particular idolatry.

2. The “Psychologizing” Approach

Basic analysis: Your problem is that you don’t see that God loves as you are. Rejoice!

This focuses on feelings, which seems to be “deeper” than behavior—but it also fails to go deep enough. We must also find out the why of our feelings. Why do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens? What are the inordinate desires that are being frustrated? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To
simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) ‘God loves you—rejoice!’ is insufficient, because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, ‘even if God loves you, but you don’t have this, than you are still a failure.’ You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all—your particular idolatry.

3. The “Gospel” Approach

Basic analysis: Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice!

This confronts the person with the real sin under the sin and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to idols. Every idol-system is a way of our works-salvation, and thus it keeps us “under the law.” Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law—when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ’s-work-salvation. Only when we realize in a new way that we are righteous in Christ is the idol’s power over us broken. Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). You will only be “under grace” and free from the controlling effects of idols to the degree that you have both: (1) repented for your idols, and (2) rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

“If we accurately comprehend the interweaving of...behavior, deceptive inner motives, and powerful external forces, then...what was once ‘dry doctrine’ becomes filled with appeal, hope, delight, and life. People see that the Gospel is far richer than a ticket to heaven and rote forgiveness for oft-repeated behavioral sins...[1 A Psychologizing approach says] ‘you feel horribly and act badly because your needs aren’t being met because your family did not meet them’...then it says, ‘God accepts you just as you are’...This is not the Biblical gospel, however...This approach just soothes the unhappy soul without getting to the source of the pain. [2 In a Moralizing approach] Christ’s forgiveness is applied simply to behavioral sins. The solution is typically...an attempt to deal with the motive problems with a single act of housecleaning. There is little sense of patient process of inner renewal...daily dying to the false gods we fabricate.” —David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

“The faith that...is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness...It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others...But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. There is a sense in which the strongest self-love that we can have...is merely the mirror image of the lively conviction we have that God loves us. Moralism, whether it takes the form of either denunciation or “pep talks,” can ultimately only create an awareness of sin and guilt or manufactured virtues built on will power...We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in
the Christian life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace…” —Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life

ASSIGNMENT: “DISMANTLING YOUR IDOLS”

A. First Step—REPENT! Take down the idols. (Judges 10:10-16; Rom. 8:13)

On the one hand (contra the Psychologizing Approach), you are called to repent. You have been worshipping an idol and rejected the true God. Every idol is the center of some system of works-righteousness by which we are seeking to ‘earn’ our salvation, so you are also trying to be your own savior. So you must repent. But this actually gives much hope—it means there is something you can do. The Psychologizing Approach, though sympathetic, is not truly empowering, because it leaves us feeling like helpless victims.

How can we repent for idols?

1. NAME THE IDOLS (getting specific)

Below, list your main idols, as you understand them now. Refer to the “D. Summary” in the “Identifying Idols” Project. Revise and add to this any new insights that may have come to you while doing the reading of this project. Then, in prayer, name these things to God. Sample prayer language: “Lord, these are the things I have built my life and heart around…”

2. UNMASK THE IDOLS (destroying their attraction)

a. Seeing how weak and poor they are (in themselves).

Idols create “delusions.” They appear more wonderful or all powerful that they really are. Stand back and get them into perspective. Look at them, now, very specifically, and in prayer, confess that these things are good, but finite and weak, and praise God for being the only source of what you need. Sample prayer language: “Lord, this is a good thing, why have I made it to be so absolute? Why do I feel so pointless without it? What is this compared to you? If I have you, I don’t have to have this! This cannot bless me and love me and help me like you! This is not my life—Jesus is my life! This is not my righteousness and worthiness. It cannot give me that. But you can and have!” Write out such a prayer in your own words.
b. Seeing how dangerous they are (to you).

Idols enslave, and they will never be satisfied. Realize how they increasingly destroy you. Look and now, in prayer, confess that these things are absolutely lethal, and ask a strong God for his help. Sample prayer language: “Lord, why am I giving this so much power over me? If I keep doing it, it will strangle me. I don’t have to do so—I will not do so any longer. I will not let this jerk me around on a leash any longer. This will not be my Master—you are my only King.” Write out such a prayer in your own words.

c. Seeing how grievous they are (to Christ)

Idols ultimately are cruel to the heart of the one who offers us so much, and at such infinite cost. Realize that when you pine after idols (in your anger, fear, despondency) that you are saying: “Lord, you are not enough. This is more beautiful, fulfilling, and sweet to my taste than you. You are negotiable, but this is not. Despite all you’ve done for me, I will only use you as long as you help me get this. You haven’t done enough for me—if you don’t help me have this, I will discard you.” In prayer, admit how deeply you have grieved and de-valued Jess, and ask forgiveness. Sample prayer language: “Lord, I see how repulsive this idol is for what it is—an idol. In yearning after this, I have trampled on your love for me. I realize now that the greatest sin in my life is a lack of thankfulness, a lack of grateful joy for what you have done for me.” Write such a prayer in your own words.

B. Second Step—REJOICE! Replacing the idols. (Luke 10:20; Col. 3:1-4)

On the one hand (contra the Moralyzing Approach), you are called to tremendous joy and encouragement. What you have turned from is the beauty, love, and joy of Christ. He offers what you have been seeking elsewhere. He awaits you, he “stands at the door” knocking (Rev. 3:20), seeking a far deeper connection of intimacy with you than he has had previously. It is an appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done and offers you that will “replace” the idol.

“Rejoicing” in the Bible is much deeper than simply being happy about something. Paul directed that we “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4), but this cannot mean “always feel happy,” since he also said that every day he was weighted with concern and anxiety over his flock (2Cor. 11:28-29). Jesus forbade his disciples to rejoice in their power over demons, and insisted that they rejoice over their salvation (Luke 10:20). What you rejoice in is the thing that is your central sweetness and consolation in life. To rejoice is to treasure a thing, to assess its value to you, to reflect on its beauty and importance until your heart rests in it and tastes the sweetness of it.
So “rejoicing” is a way of praising God until the heart is sweetened and rested, and until it relaxes its grip on anything else it thinks that it needs. The rejoicing is thus not strictly a second distinct step after repentance, but rather it completes the repentance. (In the same way, the Christian repentance is not distinct, but rather it begins the rejoicing!) Why? In Christian repentance—we do not “take our sins” to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Calvary. Sinai represents only the law of God and makes us fear God will reject us. But Calvary represents both the law of God and his commitment to save us no matter what—even if his Son has to fulfill and pay our debt to the law. “Going to Sinai” with our sins means we use the painful fear of rejection to motivate us to change. “Going to Calvary” with our sins means we use gratitude for his love to motivate us to change. The free love of Christ means that in disobedience, you have not just broken the rules, but spurned the One who lost his Father rather than lose you.

The Moralizing Approach, then, though challenging, is not in the end truly cleansing, because it only makes us afraid of the consequences of our sin, rather that disgusted with the sin itself as grieving and dishonoring to our Saviour. Thus it is only as we rejoice in the absolute certainty of his love for us that we can truly repent. In the gospel, it is the thing that most assures us (free grace) that most deeply convicts us of sin.

*How can we rejoice like this?*

**1. REJOICE IN PRINCIPLE.**

Right here and now, you can deliberately **in prayer, thank God for your salvation in Christ as a replacement for the self-salvation of idolatry in general.** Sample prayer language: “Lord, I have been trying to earn my own salvation and weave my own righteousness. But you are my salvation and righteousness. I am accepted in your Son! All my problems come because I am forgetting how loved, honored, beautiful, secure, rich, respected, embraced, and free in Jesus I am. And all other ways of finding honor, etc. are vain. Let me be so ravished with your love of me that no other love can control me.” Write such a prayer in your own words.