

Counterfeit Gods

In this series of articles from the New Testament book of Galatians 4:8-11, we've seen that in the first century, those who were part of the churches planted by Paul and Barnabas in the region of South Galatia, had come to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation because of the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 14:12-18). After their salvation, some of these Christians were clearly beginning to fall prey to a group of false teachers who were teaching that works of the Law, e.g., circumcision, must be added to the perfect and finished work of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:6-10; 3:1-29; 5:1-7) In my previous article, we saw that it's the epitome of pride to believe that we can add anything that God will accept to the finished work of Jesus. And yet, in our sinfulness, we can fall into idol worship. We saw that an idol can be defined as: "Anything or anyone, apart from God, that we rely on as the *source* of our happiness, fulfillment, and security." How can we discern the idols of our hearts? In his helpful book entitled, *Counterfeit Gods*, pastor and author, Timothy Keller lists four ways that can help us to discern our idols.

—**Look at our imagination.** In other words, the true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you incessantly and often daydream about? Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude." Keller wisely says that one or two daydreams are no indication of idolatry. But he adds: "Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material goods such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? We need to ask ourselves, "What do I habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of my heart?" Keller is not saying that you shouldn't ever contemplate your future. His focus is on looking out for unhealthy habits and a persistent lack of contentment.

—**Look at how you spend your money.** Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also." (Mt. 6:21). Your money flows effortlessly to your heart's greatest love. The mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you need to exercise self-control constantly. Keller notes that most of us tend to overspend on clothing, or on our children, or on status symbols such as homes and cars. So, then, am I tightfisted with my money when it comes to the ministries of Christ's Church but very open with my spending on other things? It's something that we all need to be aware of.

—**Look at how you respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes.** Keller writes, "If you ask for something that you don't get, you may become sad and disappointed. Then you go on. But when you pray and work for something and you don't get it and you respond with explosive anger or deep despair, then you may have found your real god." This would be the god of self and self-centeredness rather than trusting the only true God.

—Look at your most uncontrollable emotions. Keller writes, “Just as a fisherman looking for fish knows to go where the water is rolling, look for your idols at the bottom of your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong. If you’re angry ask, ‘Is there something here too important to me, something that I must have at all costs?’ Do the same thing with strong fear or despair or guilt. Ask yourself, ‘Am I so scared, because something in my life is threatened that I think is a necessity when it’s not?’[....]If you’re overworking, driving yourself into the ground with frantic activity, ask yourself, ‘Do I feel that I *must* have this thing to be fulfilled and significant?’ When you ask questions like these, you ‘pull your emotions up by the roots,’ as it were, and you will often find your idols clinging to them.”

Let me close with a quote from Christian counselor, David Powlison: “....[there is a] 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, 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.”

May God help every Christian as we seek to identify the things or people that tend to bring us into bondage rather than finding ongoing rest in the unceasing love of God and the freedom of God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.