



## Idol Factories

### ***Idols must be recognised before they can be torn down***

Effective and powerful ministry goes to the heart. Whether you think of a Bible study, a sermon, a counselling session or evangelism, the best ministry is ministry of the Word that impacts people's hearts. That's because the heart, in biblical thinking, is the centre of our being. It is not just the emotional centre, but the centre of our thoughts, actions and affections. It is the core of our being from which everything else flows.

Paul Tripp, in his excellent book, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, helps us think about heart ministry in counselling, but what he says applies much more broadly too. He reminds us that the human heart is not in good shape and right at the heart of our heart problems lies the problem of idolatry. Our hearts were made to love and worship God, but since the fall humans have turned away from God and replaced Him with a thousand substitutes.

When we turn from God we do not stop worshipping. We can't. We are hardwired to worship. The human heart is made to reach out beyond itself. So, as G. K. Chesterton said, when people reject God they do not worship nothing, they worship anything. We easily and readily erect idols in our hearts. Calvin rightly said our hearts are "*idol factories*". We will serve the god of image, or the god of possessions, or the god of sexual lusts, or the god of the stomach, or the gods of pleasure and entertainment — in fact almost anything.

Effective ministry needs to understand and address this compulsive idolatry of the human heart. Tripp reminds us, for example, that we need to understand that idolatry is subtle. Seldom do these idols look like idols. We are not so blatant as to carve idols out of wood and stone. Rather, we carve them out of our passions and desires, subtly moving away from finding our hope, security and purpose in God alone. These subtle idols of the heart can live alongside a seemingly decent Christian life. So subtle can idolatry be that we can even make an idol of gospel ministry, of church growth, or of effective preaching.

Idols mostly don't look like idols they look more like legitimate passions and pursuits. The things we pursue are often not wrong in themselves. The problem is they have assumed a wrongful place in our lives. They have become God-substitutes, so that our sense of well-being, joy and purpose is found in these things rather than in God. No matter how much we confess the right theology, God has been shunted out of central place.

We also need to understand that idols always demand sacrifices. Idols take time, money, focus and attention. As we serve our idol, we cheat God. If money has become our idol, we accumulate wealth and spend lots of time and energy thinking about how to gain and/or spend money, instead of how to invest in the work of the gospel. If entertainment is our god, we spend far too much time watching movies, listening to music and surfing the internet, and far too little time with God. If image is our god, we spend far too much time and focus on how other people perceive us and what they think of us, and far too little time focused on what God thinks of us. Tripp says idolatry is therefore always "*moral thievery*". It takes from what is rightly God's and gives it to someone or something else.

A third thing about the idols of our hearts that we need to understand is that idols grow. It is very hard to keep an idol down to size! Our appetite for pleasing an idol grows over time. That's why it is so dangerous to give an idol a foothold in your life. Give an idol a millimetre and it will take a kilometre. The guy who begins with a little pornography is soon gripped by it and wants more and

more. The woman who finds some solace and comfort in eating, finds that it becomes harder and harder not to eat. Just as God should become greater and greater in our lives, so God-substitutes become greater and greater. Yet if we know the substitutes to be wrong, they will force us to go underground even as we sacrifice to them more and more. We become deceptive, furtive, covert.

One final thing worth noting about idols (though there are many more we could add): they always fail us. Idols promise much but deliver little. Strangely, that is why we go back for more. They don't satisfy. Food doesn't satisfy the deep longings of our heart; neither does golf, or sex, or money, or success. The heart has been made for God, not for lame substitutes. So no matter how much of our idol we get, we never get enough to feel it is really good. The thrill is fleeting. The sense of satisfaction is only momentary. And often the after-taste is appalling. We are left feeling empty and cheated. But the sinful heart is foolish enough to go back for more! We think that next time it will be more satisfying. Or we think that momentary pleasure is enough.

These are heart realities we need to understand — for ourselves and for those to whom we minister. But how do we address the issue of idolatry? How do we speak to this most entrenched sin of the human heart? It is not enough for us to simply throw the word idolatry around a few times. We need to do more to help people understand, face and dispense with their God-substitutes.

First, we should speak often about what people desire, love, serve, chase after, treasure, enjoy and delight in. The most powerful forces of the human heart are our affections. We should therefore constantly probe the passions of people's hearts. What excites them? What motivates them? What gives them a reason to live? What would break their heart if it were to be taken from them? We live in a world that constantly appeals to our affections. The advertising industry, for example, seldom presents factual, rational appeals for us to buy a given product, but sells to us a lifestyle, a dream, a passion, a desire. People need to learn to sift rigorously their own desires and passions and take an honest look at what is driving them.

Once people are thinking about their deepest affections, we need to expose the imminent danger of idolatry. We will often point out the kind of truths addressed above. We will show that things that are not wrong in and of themselves easily assume a wrongful place in our lives. We will remind people that the joy of sex, or food, or material gain, or fame or anything else in this world is temporary and fleeting. We will warn people about the grip such things can gain in our lives. We will show how easily they rob God of His place in our lives. We will demonstrate that idols always leave us short-changed, never delivering what they promise.

The point of such teaching is to bring conviction of sin. People must see idolatry for what it is. Without such conviction there will be no incentive to change. With such conviction, the call to repentance gains traction. This is our third great task in ministering the Word to idolaters. We must urge true repentance which consists of both confession and change.

Confession of the sin of idolatry is not merely the acknowledgement that something has become an idol in our life. It is owning up fully to the fact that this thing has a grip on us and has effectively dethroned God. Confession must not be compromised by minimisation or blame-shifting, by self-justification or denial. Nor should it be confined to private confession only. Idolatry thrives in secrecy and very often the only way to address it is to tell someone else the idol of our heart and seek help in dealing with it. Confession must also focus on the heart impact of idolatry. We must admit that because of this idolatry we have not loved God as we should but have allowed something else to grab our affections and begin to rule us. We must confess that we have looked elsewhere for love, security, joy, hope and purpose.

We must tell people, however, that even such full and free confession as this is only one half of true repentance. Repentance demands change and that is the hardest part of all. The idolater must turn from the idol back to the true and living God. Worship of the idol must be replaced with worship of God. The idolater needs help to cultivate renewed dependence on the Lord, renewed love and passion for Him, renewed vigour in serving Him and putting Him first. Idolaters must be trained to focus on Him, rejoice in Him, treasure Him, delight in Him. He must reassume the place

the idol has stolen. One of our key tasks, then, is to present a compelling view of the beauty and excellence of God. We need to help idolaters see there is something more precious than what they currently cling to. They need to see not only their own sin but the surpassing greatness of Christ Jesus our Lord. Without leading people to see the supremacy of God and the joy and hope found in Him alone, we will leave them not merely convicted but condemned.

As we help people to reinstate God as King, we must also help them to smash their idols. That will mean different things in different situations. For some it will mean decisive and radical change as they cut off an idol completely. For others it will mean changed priorities, new accountabilities or rigorous self-monitoring. We should reassure them that this is seldom quick or easy. It is a journey on a difficult road. But the road leads to life.

It should be clear that addressing idolatry requires a serious heart-searching ministry, whether in preaching, evangelism, counselling, bible studies or personal conversation. But it should also be clear that this is true gospel ministry. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, to search out sinners, to find those who had turned from God and given themselves over to a thousand other pleasures and treasures.

Christ came and bore in Himself the punishment for the sin of idolatry so that all who turn to Him can be set free not only from the guilt but also the power of idolatry. Christ is in the business of setting people free from idols that bind so that they can serve the living and true God with all their heart. The end goal of a ministry that exposes and addresses idolatry is to see many people, both within and outside the church, freed to serve God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. No one can serve two masters. The idols of our hearts must go in order that we might set apart Christ as Lord and live all-out for Him.

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2017

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