

idolatry is the issue

*Idolatry is huge in the Bible,
dominant in our personal lives,
and irrelevant in our mistaken estimations.*

— Os Guinness

Imagine a man who has been coughing constantly. This cough keeps him up half of the night and interrupts any conversation he has that lasts more than a minute or two. The cough is so unrelenting that he goes to the doctor.

The doctor runs his tests.

Lung cancer.

Now imagine the doctor knows how tough the news will be to handle. So he doesn't tell his patient about cancer. Instead, he writes a prescription for some strong cough medicine and tells him that he should be feeling better soon. The man is delighted with this prognosis. And sure enough, he sleeps much better that night. The cough syrup seems to have solved his problem.

Meanwhile, very quietly, the cancer is eating away at his body.

As a teacher and church leader, I talk to people every week who are ~~coughing~~.

Struggling.

Hurting.

Stressing.

Cheating.

Lusting.

Spending.

Worrying.

Quitting.

Medicating.

Avoiding.

Searching.

They come to me and share their struggles.

They unload their frustrations.

They express their discouragement. They display their wounds.

They confess their sins.

When I talk to people, they point to what they believe is the problem. In their minds, they've nailed it. They can't stop coughing. But here's what I've discovered: they're talking about a symptom rather than the true illness — the true issue — which is always idolatry.

CASE STUDY 1: It's Not about the Money

When I arrive at the office, I see that he's already there, sitting outside my door. I bet he's been there for fifteen minutes. I size him up as the kind of man who has never been late to an appointment in his life.

His clothing and shoes appear to be above my scale. It occurs to me that I should be the one waiting on him, maybe for some kind of high-level business advice. I smile to myself knowing that he's probably thinking the same thing. Still, there is something about him that doesn't match his carefully put together look. What is it that doesn't fit?

There. It's in his eyes. There is deep worry in them, not the easy confidence of the business achiever.

I show him to a seat in my office. He skips the chitchat and gets right to the subject. It's easy to see he's a no-nonsense, get-to-it kind of guy.

"I'm worried about my family," he says with a deep sigh.

"Your family? Is that why you're here?"

"Well, no. It's about me, of course. I just worry about what I've done to them. Their future. Our name."

His story is short and not so sweet. The IRS has caught him cheating on his taxes, on a serious scale. He enumerates the various charges he's facing, and I don't even understand all of them. It's clear that he does, however. And it's clear that, at the very least, he will devote much of the rest of his life to making good on the financial penalties that are soon to be imposed.

I'm not sure what to tell him. He seems to understand the gravity of his situation. I certainly don't give legal advice. But I can see that it's not just about getting caught; it's more about coming to grips with what he has done.

We sit without speaking for a moment, and finally he looks up and says, "The thing I come back to over and over — and can't get an answer to — is why."

"You mean other than financial gain?"

He chuckles drily. "Financial gain? Kyle, I didn't *need* the money. I didn't need a penny of it; I'm a millionaire several times over. I could have gone to my accountants, paid my taxes right down the line, given away plenty more, and still lived the same comfortable life and never known the difference. Whatever I really owed the government? I wouldn't have missed it."

That's a world I don't live in, but I smile and nod, pretending to understand. "Okay. So if not for financial gain, then what's your best 'why' theory?"

His eyes meet mine before wandering to the window. The sun shines on his face, and I can see the slightest hint of wetness in those eyes.

"That's what I'm saying, Kyle. I don't know. I really don't get it. It's ridiculously stupid, and I don't do stupid things. Not with money or anything else. And listen —" He darts a quick look

at me. “I know I’m a sinner. I get that. I have no problem calling this what it is: sin. *Ugly* sin. But why *this* sin? Why a sin so unnecessary?”

We talk about it. We talk about his life, his family, his upbringing, and the things that have influenced him. What I want him to see is that sin doesn’t just spring up out of nowhere. It usually grows where some kind of seed has been planted.

We need to dig beneath the soil a bit.

“You said the money was unnecessary,” I say. “But money, as a rule, has been pretty important for you. Would you agree?”

“Sure. Obviously.”

“Important enough that you might describe it as your main motivation, as your master goal?”

He thinks about it. “Yeah. That’s fair.”

“As a god?”

For a moment he doesn’t understand the question. Then he exhales slowly. I see the answer written across his face.

“It wasn’t always like that,” he says.

“No, it never is, in the beginning. Goals can become gods. You start to serve them, live for them, and sacrifice for them. In the beginning, it was about your money serving you. But at some point, do you think you switched roles?”

“I never thought about it like that.”

CASE STUDY 2: No Big Deal

She’s a young woman who grew up in our church. Her family wants me to meet and talk with her. They’re concerned because she’s about to move in with her boyfriend, who isn’t a Christian. This ought to be a fun one.

I call her twice and leave messages, but she doesn’t return my call. The third time she picks up. She knows why I’m calling and tries to laugh it off.

"I can't believe my parents are making such a big deal out of this," she says with a nervous laugh. I can picture her rolling her eyes. In her mind this whole thing is a mild cough and nothing to worry about.

"Well, I appreciate your talking to me for a few minutes. But I have to ask, do you think it's possible that you've got this backward?"

"What do you mean?"

"That instead of making a big deal out of nothing, it could be that you're making nothing out of a big deal?"

More nervous laughter. "It's not a big deal," she says again.

"Do you mind my telling you why I think it is?"

She sighs deeply and proceeds to give me her prediction of all the reasons she thinks I'll produce.

I interrupt her with a question. "Have you thought about how much moving in together is going to cost you?"

"You mean the cost of the apartment?"

"No, I'm not necessarily talking about money. I mean the way your family feels about it, and the pressure you're getting from them. That's a kind of price, right?"

"Yeah, I guess it is, but that's their problem."

"And what is this going to cost your future marriage?"

"I don't even know if we're going to get married," she responds.

"I'm not necessarily talking about your getting married to him, because statistically speaking, you most likely won't."

She understands what I'm getting at, but I push it a bit farther. "How much is this going to cost your future husband? What price will he have to pay for this decision?" She has to stop and consider that one.

I continue to count the ways that this decision is a big deal, because it's costing her more than she knows.

"So here's what I suggest. If you're willing to pay a price, then

this must be pretty important to you. It must be a fairly big deal if you're willing to go through all of this."

I take her silence for reflection, and I finally get to my point. "When I see the sacrifices you are willing to make, and the fact that you are willing to ignore what God has to say about all this, it seems to me that you've turned this relationship into a god."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A god is what we sacrifice for and what we pursue. From where I sit, you have the Lord God on one side saying one thing, and your boyfriend on the other side saying something else. And you're choosing your boyfriend over God. The Bible calls that idolatry, and it's actually a pretty big deal."

No nervous laughter this time. She confesses, "I've never thought about it like that."

CASE STUDY 3: The Secret Struggle

He comes in maybe five or ten minutes late.

He had asked if we could talk for a few minutes, and I suggested meeting for coffee. But he wanted to meet someplace "a little more private." So we set my office as the location.

He arrives and pauses in the doorway, as if still not sure he wants to keep this appointment.

"Come on in." I smile and motion toward a seat.

He answers my smile with a very brief one. He sits, and his body language is all about reluctance. He wraps his arms one around another, lightly massaging his right elbow. I guess he's about my age, midthirties, an ordinary guy. He hasn't told me what this meeting is about, but I know. The conversation I'm about to have has become very familiar.

I ask him a few mundane questions about his work, where he's from, anything to break the ice and create a more relaxed setting. When we've done that for a couple of minutes, he finally broaches

his subject. I can tell it takes all the courage he can summon to release his long-held secret.

"I ... um ... I think I'm addicted to pornography, or something," he stammers.

He looks at his shoes.

"Okay. Well you're not the first person to walk in here and sit in that seat and say those words. How long has this been a struggle?"

He tells his story, starting when he was twelve years old and saw certain images with the guys — in magazines smuggled in from somebody's dad's closet. Pictures that disturbed him at first. Pictures that lodged in his mind, that wouldn't go away, that started calling to him. Pictures he can perfectly visualize all these years later.

He talks about his hatred of the internet. He describes the web as if it were his mortal enemy.

"In the old days, people had to go to those stores," he says. "Ugly stores with the windows all painted over. Cheap, seedy places. I never had the courage to go into one of those stores."

"But the internet is anonymous."

"Exactly," he says. "It's so easy. Any kind of picture, any kind of video is at your fingertips. Just like that. Instant gratification, whenever you feel the slightest urge."

He speaks with the weary tones of a twenty-year slave, of a prisoner who has given up on escape plans.

"What am I supposed to do," he says, "unplug the computer? I'm dependent on the internet like everyone else. I need it for work. I need it for everything. Even if I just used a phone, you can pull up those images there. Turn on the television, and there are a million suggestions. Am I supposed to just watch the Disney Channel?"

He says he had no idea what pornography would do to his life, particularly his relationships. He seems to understand, at least to some degree, how it has changed the way he views and interacts with women.

“Thing is,” he said, “you come to see it’s just an itch. That’s all. An itch. But it never goes away, and you have to scratch. Well, you have to scratch harder and deeper as time goes by. You know what I mean?”

“I know.”

There is silence. I’m sure he’s expecting me to give the same advice he has heard for so many years: Put a filter on your internet browser. Join a support group. Find an accountability partner. Redirect your eyes. All helpful suggestions, but I know he’s tried them all multiple times; otherwise he wouldn’t be sitting in front of me.

What I know is that there is an idol that must be dethroned, and until that happens he will suffer. He’ll enjoy no intimacy in relationships. He’ll struggle to have any real connection with God.

“You think what you have is a lust problem, but what you really have is a worship problem. The question you have to answer each day is, Will I worship God or will I worship sex?”

He doesn’t verbalize it, but the expression on his face says, “I’ve never thought about it like that.”

What Lies Beneath

Idolatry isn’t just one of many sins; rather it’s the one great sin that all others come from. So if you start scratching at whatever struggle you’re dealing with, eventually you’ll find that underneath it is a false god. Until that god is dethroned, and the Lord God takes his rightful place, you will not have victory.

Idolatry isn’t *an* issue; it is *the* issue. All roads lead to the dusty, overlooked concept of false gods. Deal with life on the glossy outer layers, and you might never see it; scratch a little beneath the surface, and you begin to see that it’s always there, under some other coat of paint. There are a hundred million different symptoms, but the issue is always idolatry.

That's why, when Moses stood on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments from God, the first one was, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2–3).

When God issued this command during the time of Moses, the people were familiar with a lot of other gods. God's people had spent more than four hundred years in Egypt as slaves. Egypt was crowded with gods. They had taken over the neighborhood—literally. The Egyptians had local gods for every district. Egypt was the Baskin-Robbins of gods. You could pick and choose the flavors you wanted.

The Bible's paradigm is different. When we hear God say, "You will have no other gods before me," we think of it as a hierarchy: God is always in first place. But there are no places. God isn't interested in competing against others or being first among many.

God will not be part of any hierarchy.

He wasn't saying "before me" as in "ahead of me." A better understanding of the Hebrew word translated "before me" is "in my presence."

God declines to sit atop an organizational flowchart. He *is* the organization. He is not interested in being president of the board. He *is* the board. And life doesn't work until everyone else sitting around the table in the boardroom of your heart is fired. He is God, and there are no other applicants for that position. There are no partial gods, no honorary gods, no interim gods, no assistants to the regional gods.

God is saying this not because he is insecure but because it's the way of truth in this universe, which is his creation. Only one God owns and operates it. Only one God designed it, and only one God knows how it works. He is the only God who can help us, direct us, satisfy us, save us.

As we read Exodus 20, we see that the one true God has had it with the imitation and substitute gods. So God tells the nation of

Israel to break up the pantheon; send it home. All other god activity is cancelled. He makes sure the people understand that he is the one and only. He is the Lord God.

You may be thinking, Thanks for the history lesson, but that was a long time ago. After all, in our time, the problem doesn't appear to be that people worship *many* gods; it's that they don't worship *any* god.

Yet my guess is that the list of our gods is longer than theirs. Just because we call them by different names doesn't change what they are. We may not have the god of commerce, the god of agriculture, the god of sex, or the god of the hunt. But we do have portfolios, automobiles, adult entertainment, and sports. If it walks like an idol, and quacks like an idol ...

You can call it a cough instead of calling it cancer, but that doesn't make it any less deadly.

Idol Makeover

One of our problems in identifying the gods is that their identities not only lack the usual trappings of religion; they are also things that often aren't even wrong. Is God against pleasure? Sex? Money? Power?

These things are not immoral but amoral; they are morally neutral until they are not. You could be serving something that is, in itself, very commendable. It could be family or career. It could be a worthy cause. You could even be feeding the hungry and healing the sick. All of those are good things.

The problem is that the instant something takes the place of God, the moment it becomes an end in itself rather than something to lay at God's throne, it becomes an idol. When someone or something replaces the Lord God in the position of glory in our lives, then that person or thing by definition has become our god.

So to identify some gods, look at what you pursue. Another

way to identify the gods at war in your life is to look at what you create.

Remember your commandments.

First: no other gods.

Second: no *making* other gods to worship.

The profound wisdom of that second commandment is that anything in the world can be hammered into an idol, and therefore can be a false god, if misplaced at the top spot of our affections. It's DIY idolatry: choose from our handy assortment of gods, mix and match, create your own.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the people waiting below whined because it was taking so long. Moses had left his brother, Aaron, in charge, and the people began clamoring for a god to lead them. They gathered everyone's gold, put it on the fire, and made a golden calf to worship. A little bit ironic, don't you think? The very moment God was telling Moses about having no other gods before him, the people were down below rigging up a god.

From later in the Bible, here is a reflection on what these people did: "The people made a calf at Mount Sinai; they bowed before an image made of gold. They traded their glorious God for a statue of a grass-eating bull" (Ps. 106:19–20 NLT).

That's not a good trade. They traded the Creator God for a god of their own creation.

Are we really any different? We replace God with statues of our own creation.

A house that we constantly upgrade.

A promotion that comes with a corner office.

Acceptance into the fraternity or sorority.

A team that wins the championship.

A body that is toned and fit.

We work hard at molding and creating our golden calves.

I already hear what you're thinking.

“You could say that about anything. You could take any issue, anything someone devoted anything to, and make it out to be idolatry.”

Exactly.

Anything at all can become an idol once it becomes a substitute for God in our lives.

To describe the concept more clearly, anything that becomes the purpose or driving force of your life probably points back to idolatry of some kind. Think about what you have pursued and created, and ask yourself, Why?

If you have a food addiction, why?

If you have “hot button” issues that tend to get you upset, why?

If you plan to go shopping this weekend even though you are drowning in debt, why?

If you spend countless hours fixing up the car and redecorating the house, why?

To think of these things as forms of idolatry, we need to use new imagery. Discard the idea of golden cows and multi-armed figurines. Even, just for a moment, strip away the whole idea of idolatry as an item on a ten-point list of don'ts.

This next exercise may seem a bit weird, but stick with me. I want you to reimagine idolatry as a tree.

See it in your mind: one of those great oak trees that seem older than time itself, one with impressive branches reaching out in every direction, branches growing from branches. And when erosion sets in, down the bank or beside the waters, you can see just how deep and far flung its roots are.

Imagine this tree of idolatry with many branches, each with something tied to it.

From one of the branches dangles a pot of gold.

Another branch grows food of all kinds; every delicious food imaginable seems to sprout from a different section of that branch.

Another branch widens into a flat, round ending, and when

you move closer, you can see that it is really a mirror that shows an idealized reflection of yourself.

Yet another branch is carved with beautiful craftsmanship. You follow its sinuous lines and realize it is the image of two human figures, entwined in a sensuous embrace.

One branch has, as fruit, different sets of keys — one set to a luxury car, another to a beach house in Florida.

Quite a peculiar tree. It has many other branches, each one with a curious item attached to it.

Here's the point: idolatry is the tree from which our sins and struggles grow.

Idolatry is always the issue. It's the trunk of the tree, and all other problems are just branches.