

# The Idol Factory

By C.J. Mahaney

*“You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 20:3*

*“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” 1 John 5:21*

## Introduction

“As modern people we usually think of an idol as an animal or human figure made of stone or wood. We see it as an object for religious devotion or magical power for premodern people who might prostrate themselves on the ground before it. If we have updated the idea at all, we might use ‘idolatry’ to describe someone’s obsessional preoccupations with money or of an ‘idol’ like Elvis Presley. We have, in effect, distanced ourselves from the whole idea of idolatry by pushing it out to the extreme cultural and psychological margins of life. This distance has produced two problems: First, we misunderstand the most comprehensive description of the shape of unbelief used by the writers of the Bible. If we as Christians today see idolatry only at life’s margins, we will be ill-equipped to use this powerful critical tool as the apostles and prophets did - to understand and challenge the surrounding world. The second problem is similar to the first but even more important. If we do not understand the nature of idolatry, we will not be able to recognize or guard against it in our own lives and communities...Overlooking idolatry makes us blind toward our own problems...Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well educated hearts and minds. The apostle Paul 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. All too often it is found on center stage.” *Richard Keyes*

“Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible and one of the most powerful spiritual and intellectual concepts in the believer’s arsenal. Yet for Christians today it is one of the least meaningful notions and is surrounded with ironies. Perhaps this is why many evangelicals are ignorant of the idols in their lives...Contemporary evangelicals are little better at recognizing and resisting idols than modern secular people are...There can be no believing communities without an unswerving eye to the detection and destruction of idols.” *Os Guinness & John Seel*

## I. Defining Idolatry

“An idol is not simply a statue of wood, stone, or metal; it is anything we love and pursue in place of God, and can also be referred to as a ‘false god’ or a ‘functional god.’ In biblical terms, an idol is something other than God that we set our hearts on ( Luke 12:29;1 Cor. 10:6), that motivates us (1 Cor. 4:5), that masters or rules us (Ps. 119:133), or that we serve (Matt. 6:24).” *Ken Sande*

“ An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as God. All sorts of things are potential idols, depending only on our attitudes and actions toward them...Idolatry may not involve explicit denials of God’s existence or character. It may well come in the form of an over-attachment to something that is, in itself,

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perfectly good...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 - anything that can substitute for God.” *Richard Keyes*  
“The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.” *John Calvin*

“Sometimes the object of desire itself is evil: e.g., to kill someone, to steal, to control the cocaine trade in Philadelphia. But often the object of desire is good, and the evil lies in the lordship of the desire. Our will replaces God’s as that which determines how we live...Natural affections (for any good thing) become inordinate, ruling cravings. We are meant to be ruled by godly passions and desires. Natural desires for good things are meant to exist subordinate to our desire to please the Giver of gifts. The fact that the evil lies in the ruling status of the desire, not the object, is frequently a turning point in counseling.

Consider this example. A woman commits adultery, and repents. She and her husband rebuild the marriage, painstakingly, patiently. Eight months later the man finds himself plagued with subtle suspiciousness. The wife senses it, and feels a bit like she lives under FBI surveillance. The husband is grieved by his suspiciousness, because he has no objective reasons for suspicion. ‘I’ve forgiven her; we’ve rebuilt our marriage; we’ve never communicated better; why do I hold onto this mistrust?’ What finally emerges is that he is willing to forgive the past, but he is attempting to control the future. His craving could be stated this way: ‘I want to guarantee that betrayal never, ever happens again.’ The very intensity of his craving starts to poison the relationship; it places him in the stance of continually evaluating and judging his wife, rather than loving her. What he wants cannot be guaranteed this side of heaven. He sees the point, sees his inordinate desire to ensure the future. But he bursts out, ‘What’s wrong with wanting my wife to love me? What’s wrong with wanting her to remain faithful to our marriage?’ Here is where this truth is so sweet. There is nothing wrong with the object of desire; there is everything wrong when it rules his life. The process of restoring that marriage took a long step forward as he grasped a lesson his Shepherd had for him.” *David Powlison*

## **II. Discerning Idolatry**

### **A. The Source of Idolatry:**

*“When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart...” Ezekial 14:4*

*“But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”*  
James 1:14

“The human heart is a factory of idols...Everyone of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.” *John Calvin*

### **B. Means of Identifying Idolatry**

#### **1. Scripture**

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*“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Hebrews 4:12-13*

2. **Holy Spirit**

*“The heart is deceitful above all things...Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind...” Jeremiah 17:9-10*

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Psalm 139:23-24*

3. **Church**

*“The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.” Proverbs 20:5*

*“Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” Proverbs 27:5*

*“What is the friend, who will be a real blessing to my soul? Is it one, that will humour my fancies, and flatter my vanity? Is it enough, that he loves my person, and would spend his time and energies in my service? This comes far short of my requirement...The friend for my case is one, who will watch over me with *open rebuke*; but a reprover, when needful; not a flatterer. The genuineness of friendship without this mark is more than doubtful; its usefulness utterly paralyzed. That *secret love*, that dares not risk a *faithful wound*, and spares *rebuke*, rather than inflict pain, judged by God’s standard, is hatred. (Lev. 19:17) Far better the wound should be probed than covered. *Rebuke*, kindly, considerately, and prayerfully administered, cements friendship, rather than loosens its. The contrary instances only prove, that the union had never been based upon substantial principle.” Charles Bridges*

*“Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.” Proverbs 12:1*

4. **Circumstances**

Tests of adversity and prosperity reveal our idols. James 1:2-4;9-11

*“But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God...” 2 Corinthians 1:9*

5. **Behavior**

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*“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious...” Galatians 5:19*

*“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”  
Colossians 3:5*

### **C. Application**

*“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” I John 5:21*

“John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? It is a question bearing on the immediate motivation for one’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question. Who or what ‘rules’ my behavior, the Lord or a substitute?” *David Powlison*

**Basic Biblical Concepts of Human Motivation by David Powlison: Thirty-Four questions to get you thinking about the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).**

1. What do you love? Hate?  
This “first great commandment” question searches your heart, soul, mind and might. There is no deeper question to ask of any person at any time. There is no deeper explanation for why you do what you do.
2. What do you want, desire, crave, lust and wish for? Whose desires do you obey?  
This summarizes the internal operations of the “flesh” in the New Testament epistles. Notice, sometimes another person’s will rules you (peer pressure, people-pleasing, slave-like behavior). Your heart’s craving in such cases is to get whatever good they promise and avoid whatever bad they threaten.
3. What do you seek, aim for, pursue? What are your goals and expectations?
5. What do you fear? What do you *not* want? What do you tend to worry about?
7. What do you think you need? What are your felt needs?  
Felt needs are frequently taken as necessities to be acquired, not as deceptive slave-masters.
10. Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security?  
This is the Psalms’ question, digging out your escapism and false trust, false refuge.
11. What or who do you trust?  
Trust is one of the major verbs relating you to God--or to false gods and lies.

13. Who must you please? Whose opinion of you counts? From whom do you desire approval and fear rejection? Whose value system do you measure yourself against? In whose eyes are you living? When you lose God, you enter a jungle of distortion. You tend to live before your own eyes or before the eyes of others--or both.

### III. Destroying Idols

Sanctification:

“Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is vivification, the growing and maturing of the new man; its negative side is mortification, the weakening and killing of the old man.” *J.I. Packer*

### IV. The Fruit of Identifying Idolatry

#### A. Knowledge of God

*“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”* John 17:3

*“He that hath slight thoughts of sin, never had great thoughts of God.”* John Owen

#### B. Understanding of the Gospel

*“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel---not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”* I Corinthians 1:17

“What happens to the Gospel when idolatry themes are not grasped? ‘God loves you’ typically becomes a tool to meet a need for self-esteem in people who feel like failures. The particular content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - ‘grace for sinners and deliverance for the sinned-against’ - is down-played or even twisted into ‘unconditional acceptance for the victims of others’ lack of acceptance.’ Where ‘the Gospel’ is shared, it comes across something like this: ‘God accepts *you* just as *you* are. God has unconditional love for you.’ That is not the biblical Gospel, however. God’s love is not Rogerian unconditional positive regard writ large. A need theory of motivation - rather than an idolatry theory - bends the Gospel solution into ‘another gospel’ which is essentially false.

The Gospel is better than unconditional love. The Gospel says, ‘God accepts *you* just as *Christ* is. God has ‘contraconditional’ love for you.’ Christ bears the curse you deserve. Christ is fully pleasing to the Father and gives you His own perfect goodness. Christ reigns

in power, making you the Father's child and coming close to you to begin to change what is unacceptable to God about you. God never accepts me 'as I am.' He accepts me 'as I am in Jesus Christ.' The center of gravity is different. The true Gospel does not allow God's love to be sucked into the vortex of the soul's lust for acceptability and worth in and of itself. Rather, it radically decenters people - what the Bible calls 'fear of the Lord' and 'faith' - to look outside themselves.

Christian counselors with a psychologizing drift typically are very concerned with ministering God's love to people who view God as the latest and greatest critic whom they never can please. But their failure to conceptualize people's problems in the terms this article has been exploring inevitably creates a tendency towards teaching a Liberal Gospel. The cross becomes simply a demonstration that God loves me. It loses its force as the substitutionary atonement by the perfect Lamb in my place, who invites my repentance for heart-pervading sin." *David Powlison*

### C. Conviction of Sin

*"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."* Job 42:5-6

"I have affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness, very frequently to such a degree as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping...so that I have often been obliged to shut myself up. I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness and the badness of my heart than ever I had before my conversion...It is affecting to think how ignorant I was, when a young Christian, of the bottomless, infinite depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy, and deceit left in my heart." *Jonathan Edwards*

"If 'idolatry' is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then 'desires' is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for the same drift. Both are shorthand for *the* problem of human beings."

The deep questions of motivation are not 'What is motivating me?' The final question is, 'Who is the master of this pattern of thought, feeling or behavior?' In the biblical view, we are religious, inevitably bound to one god or another. People do not have needs. We have masters, lords, gods, be they oneself, other people, valued objects, Satan. The metaphor of an idolatrous heart and society capture the fact that human motivation bears an automatic relationship to God: Who, other than the true God, is my god?

When a 'need for security' propels my life or a segment of my life, I am again engaging in religious behavior. Rather than serving the true God, the god I serve is the approval and respect of people, either myself or others. I am an idolater. I am not 'motivated by a need for security.' I am 'motivated by lust for security rather than ruled by God.'" *David Powlison*

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“I remember the time I counseled a man who habitually escaped life’s pressures into TV, food, video games, alcohol, pornography, antique collecting, sci-fi novels. Where to begin? Could I find a passage to focus his problems? I wasn’t sure what to pick up on. Then it struck me: Try the Psalms--as a whole! Almost every single Psalm, in some way or other, portrays the Lord as our refuge in trouble. The Psalms implicitly and explicitly rebuke taking refuge in anything less; the Psalms offer steadfast love and mercy; the Psalms spur us to know and obey God in the trenches of life. This man felt vaguely guilty for some of his bad behavior. But he didn’t see the pattern or the seriousness. His efforts at change were half-baked and unsuccessful. Conviction of the specific sin of his heart--turning from the living God in order to seek idolatrous refuge--woke him up, and made him see his behavioral sins in a fresh way. He even began to identify little escapist tricks he hadn’t even realized he did--ways he (mis)used humor or made subtle excuses for himself. Christ’s grace became very real and necessary. He became motivated to practical change--to face pressures and responsibilities to God’s glory.” *David Powlison*

“As the inner light increases, you will see the imperfections which you have heretofore as basically much greater and more harmful than you had seen them up to the present...But this experience, far from discouraging, will help to uproot all your self-confidence, and to raze to the ground the whole edifice of pride. Nothing marks so much the solid advancement of a soul, as this view of his wretchedness without anxiety and without discouragement.”  
*Fenelon*

“Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.” *Blaise Pascal*

#### **D. Forgiveness of Sin**

*“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” Psalm 130:3-4*

“Those who feel sin most deeply are those who feel most forgiven.” *Donald Whitney*

#### **E. Growth in Godliness**

*“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature; sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire and greed, which is idolatry...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” Colossians 3:5,10*

“We need to cultivate in our own hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all holiness.” *Jerry Bridges*

“The person who understands the evil in his own heart is the only person who is useful, fruitful, and solid in his beliefs and obedience. Others only delude themselves and thus upset

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families, churches, and all other relationships. In their self-pride and judgment of others, they show great inconsistency.” *John Owen*

**F. Humility**

*“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”* 1 Timothy 1:15

“We may justly condemn ourselves as the greatest sinners we know, because we know more of the folly of our own heart than we do of other people’s...Therefore every sinner knows more of the aggravations of his own guilt than he does of other people’s, and consequently may justly look upon himself to be the greatest sinner that he knows.” *William Law*

**G. Passion for God**

*“But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”* Luke 7:47

“He that hath doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion...The holy Scriptures do everywhere place religion very much in the affections...If the Creator has wisely made human nature in this manner, why then misuse our affections? Can we Christians find anything worthier to respond to with all our affections than what is set forth to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Can anything be worthier to affect us than this?” *Jonathan Edwards*

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