

# DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENES THAT GLORIFIES GOD

## *Devotion When Your Heart's Divided*

### **Introduction**

In the first study of this series we learned the importance of remembering that singleness is a calling, not an identity. Our identity as Christians is in Jesus Christ and what he says about us, regardless of whether we are single or married. Singleness is not our identity, it is a calling. Then, in the second study, we learned just what singleness is all about as a calling. We saw how singleness is uniquely designed by God to demonstrate the devotion that the whole Church is to have towards Christ, displaying Christ's supreme worth and sufficiency. In the last study, then, we saw a real life example of a man who lived out the purpose of his singleness through his whole-hearted devotion to the Lord—the missionary turned martyr, Jim Elliot.

Now maybe you've been following along with us until this point, but in your mind you're thinking something like, "yes, I see that my identity is in Christ and not in my singleness, *but* I really don't think I could ever be happy unless I am married". Or, "I know singleness is a high calling, *but* I can't think of anything I want more than to have kids one day". Or, "yeah, Jim Elliot was a cool guy, *but* for me, I can't imagine life without my dream job." If you've been following along with us, wrestling all the while with a desire you don't see how you could live without, this is the concern we want to now address. In this study, we are going to examine the main obstacle standing between you and your devotion to Christ: idolatry. Idolatry is not a struggle unique to singles, but is one that all Christians must face. In what follows, then, we will answer the question of what idolatry is. We will then look at the benefits of idol-free devotion to Christ, seeing that only in being content in God can we find the fulfillment that idols can never provide. Our hope in this study is to make you aware of the obstacles standing between you and your devotion to Christ, so that you may be more able to joyfully serve Christ in your calling.

### **Idolatry: What is it?**

In answering the question of what idolatry is, the first thing to recognize is this: an idol can be anything. In Colossians 3:5, Paul provides help for our understanding of idolatry when he says that covetousness *is* idolatry. When you covet what you do not have, Paul says, you commit idolatry. In Ephesians 5:5, Paul similarly says that a person who is covetous *is* an idolater. An idol is anything you covet. You see, idolatry begins at the heart level. It starts with our desires. John Calvin said that the human heart is a "perpetual factory of idols," in that it is constantly creating new gods to desire.<sup>1</sup> These desires can be, and usually are, for things that are good in themselves but that God has not chosen to give to us. Coveting happens when we refuse to be content with God, and all he has promised to be for us in Christ, and we say in our hearts: "I need *that* to make me happy." Do you want to know what idols you have in your life? Ask yourself, "What

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Louisville: Westminster Press.

do I covet?” An idol is something that turns from a *want* into a *need* or a *must have*. Is there something in your life, besides Christ, that you *must have*? That your heart will not find peace without? Idolatry happens in our hearts when we take good things and make them ultimate for our happiness. Idols can be absolutely anything because our hearts can covet absolutely anything.

For most of us, though, when we hear words like “idols” or “idolatry”, we first think of little golden statues hidden in a cave somewhere, waiting for an archaeologist like Indiana Jones to remove them, triggering booby traps like flying spears or giant rolling boulders. Even if our minds go to more common imagery, however, like the statues existing in Buddhism or Hinduism, many of us still feel a significant degree of distance from such idolatry. We have a hard time relating to the concept of idolatry, since we think of idols only as man-made statues. If we don’t struggle with the temptation to get down on our knees and pray to a carving of a funny-looking man, then we must not have a problem worshipping idols. Tim Keller addresses this misconception in his new book, “Counterfeit Gods,” and he reminds us that the carved statues of ancient peoples represented various things valued by the nation. For instance, in the ancient Greco-Roman world there was “Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty; Ares, the god of war; Artemis, the goddess of fertility and wealth; Hephaestus, the god of craftsmanship.”<sup>2</sup> Each idol was not merely a statue, in other words, but represented a value or desire of the people. In applying this to our modern situation, Keller makes the following statement:

We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.<sup>3</sup>

Idols, in other words, are not, and never were, merely statues. They always represented deeper desires people had in their hearts. Idols, then, are not limited to man-made carvings; they can be anything we desire.

Since idols take a place in our hearts and desires that is reserved for God alone, the second thing to observe is this: idols compete with our devotion to God. In Exodus 20, after saving his people Israel from the land of Egypt and bringing them into his presence at the foot of Mount Sinai, God commanded his people: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3). Old Testament scholar Victor Hamilton points out that the expression, “before me”, really means something like, “in addition to me.”<sup>4</sup> You see, the temptation for Israel was never to totally abandon the Lord in favor of another god, but was instead to worship other gods in addition to the Lord. This is what happened throughout the Old Testament in Israel’s history. They worshipped Yahweh, the one true God, at his temple in Jerusalem, and they worshipped false gods like Baal at various

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*. New York: Dutton, 2009. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. 191.

“high places” for worship they had set up (1 Kings 3:3, 14:23). This same temptation exists for us. Even if we acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the only true God, we can be led astray to worship any of the numerous idols our hearts can create.

The way an idol competes with God is by promising to do for you what only God can truly do. An idol says, “You long for significance and meaning, I can provide that for you. Follow me, serve me, and you will find the significance and meaning your heart desires.” And so we make an idol out of our career, perhaps, or our ministry, thinking that it will provide us what only God can. An idol says, “You desire to be known, loved, and accepted. I can provide that for you; God cannot. So look to me, devote yourself to me, and you will find your heart’s desires fulfilled.” And so we make an idol out of a relationship, sex, maybe a community, believing that that person or thing can satisfy the longing of our heart. The thing about idols, though, is that they can never deliver what they promise to be for you. An idol will promise to take away all your pain, but only God can deliver in this promise: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). An idol will promise to answer your heart’s question: “Am I loved?” But only God delivers an answer to that question that can forever calm your wondering heart: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

Idols lie to us about what they can do for us, and so they compete with our devotion to Christ. For when your heart has an object of worship, in addition to Christ, you will do what people always do for the things they worship—make sacrifices for it. Just like the ancient Greeks made sacrifices to their gods, so will you make sacrifices for yours. You may sacrifice your time, your money, or your existing relationships. And as long as the idol remains in your heart, and you believe the promises that it makes, it will demand more and greater sacrifices. Eventually, you may sacrifice your moral principles. Bit by bit, you may allow the boundaries you have set be crossed, giving up more of your heart and body for what you believe will provide you what you most deeply need. You may even find yourself sacrificing your belief in the existence of God, your heart seeking to suppress the knowledge of him rather than live without the idol you crave. This is the essence of idolatry. Idols compete with your devotion to Christ, by making promises they can never fulfill, and demanding your sacrificial obedience.

### **Idol-free Devotion**

If we are to live lives wholly devoted to Christ, then we must view the benefits of devotion to Christ as far outweighing the fleeting benefits derived from idols. What, then, are the benefits of idol-free devotion to Christ? What is the value of tearing down these “strongholds” of idolatry in our hearts (2 Cor 10:4)? Asking that question is like asking what the benefits are of drinking purified, spring water over luke-warm, sewage water. The list of benefits would be lengthy. Here, though, are two of the main benefits of devotion to Christ that is free from entanglement with idols.

First, tearing down your idols enables you to enjoy people. When your heart is not content in Christ and you are seeking from others what they could never give you, even if they wanted to, you will not be able to fully enter into the joy of relationships with people. If your devotion is not to Jesus Christ, you will be like those Paul speaks of in Titus 3:3: “Slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” When your heart is enslaved by the false promises of an idol, you will view people as obstacles to the fulfillment of your heart’s desires. If you have made an idol of a promotion at your job, for instance, rather than being able to fully love and enjoy your fellow co-workers, your mind will be occupied with malicious thoughts about them, devising how you can secure the promotion for yourself. Idolatry will make you like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, whose idolatrous obsession with the ring of power took away all his joy in others and replaced it with a frightful paranoia that they would try to take his “precious” from him. James comments on this in James 4:1-5. According to James, it is our covetous, idolatrous hearts that are the cause of our fights with one another. James says, “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (Jam 4:2). When you have made something other than Christ the ultimate hope of your heart, you will view people as barriers to be by-passed, rather than fellow travelers in life’s journey to be enjoyed.

A serious danger also exists, however, when a person herself is made into an idol. If a man or woman is looked to for what only God can provide, then what is idolized will eventually be demonized. In other words, when the person you may have made an idol of eventually fails to live up to the divine expectations you have set for them, you will find yourself resenting them. The person you once thought was without a flaw, the perfect fulfillment of all your hopes and dreams, suddenly becomes a monster, one you cannot say a positive thing about. Of course, the truth of the matter when this happens is usually not that the idolized person has changed, but that the truth has finally set in: he or she is just a fallen human being, like you. Dismantling the idols of your heart allows you to accept people as they are: fallen, broken, yet redeemable people that God loves. Only when your expectations for others are in accord with reality can you really enjoy all they have to offer, and can you be able to truly love them, thinking of their needs as more important than your own.

Second, and most important of all, tearing down your idols enables you to enjoy God. Idols compete for your devotion to Christ like weeds choking the life out of a plant in a garden. Jeremiah 2:9 says of God’s idolatrous people: “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.” The most tragic thing that can be said about idolatry is that it prevents people from the joy of God himself. Jeremiah goes on in this passage to describe idolatry as being offered a drink from a cool and refreshing spring, but turning instead, digging a hole in the ground, and trying to get some satisfaction out of the dirty water that is ebbing away in it. Idols rob you of your joy in Christ. They rob you of joy, period, because true and lasting joy can only be found in Jesus Christ, who alone can meet all the deepest needs our hearts are longing for. When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, whose repeated journeys to the well paralleled her repeated attempts to find fulfillment

through men (she was going on her sixth husband at this point), he said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:13-14). The quest to find satisfaction in serving idols is a dead-end street. It leads nowhere. Only in knowing Christ can our search for lasting joy be ended, although the joy we find in him will never end. The amazing, good news of the Bible is that although we have sinned greatly against God, by settling for pleasures far less fulfilling than are found in him, he sent his Son to pay the price for our sins, and to give us the power by his Spirit to turn from these fruitless idols and enjoy him for all eternity. To prefer devotion to Christ over devotion to idols is to prefer truth over lies, beauty over distortion, satisfaction over thirst, pleasure over pain. Devotion to idols leads only to death. Only in devotion to Christ can we find the life we are looking for.