

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENESSE THAT GLORIFIES GOD

Devotion by Demolition

Introduction

In the last study, we saw how devotion to anything other than Christ can become an idol for our hearts to worship, and instead of bringing our hearts the fulfillment that they promise, they actually rob us of our joy and do damage to God's reputation. Maybe you have found that you've been able to identify some of the idols in your life, people or things that you are seeking to give you what only God can provide you. If you have been able to identify some idols in your life, you may be wondering, "Now what? How do I move from point A to point B? How do I demolish these idols in my heart so I may be free to pursue the undivided devotion to Christ that alone can bring me fulfillment?" If you're aware of sin in your life but discouraged because you don't know how to conquer it, or maybe you find that you are not fighting at all, we hope this study will help you to better understand the battle you are facing, and provide you some help in the fight. What we want to address in this study is this question of how to move from devotion to idols to idol-free devotion to Christ. In what follows, we will look briefly at three features of this battle we all find ourselves in. We will then learn four strategies for fighting this battle so that we may devote ourselves to Christ alone.

Understanding the Battle

If you are going to learn to fight against the idols your hearts create, then the first thing you need to recognize is that you are in a battle. There is a war being waged, and you are in it. Unless you recognize this you will not be prepared to fight the way you need to. A person who believes in her mind she is enjoying a day at the beach will not be able to fight off the blows of the enemy on the battlefield. 1 Peter 2:11 says: "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." You are under attack, Peter says, and it is your sinful idolatry that is attacking you. You see, sin attacks your soul, and you need to know this. When you are tempted to put your hope in a relationship rather than in Christ, or in money, or success, or an opportunity of some sort, your soul is being attacked. The temptation to sin that you may struggle with is not, in other words, simply like a beach vendor trying to get you to buy some sunglasses or get your hair braided, but it is a violent enemy stabbing and cutting at your soul. Giving in to temptation, and allowing your heart to be devoted to an idol, does serious harm to your soul. This is the battle we are in. The idols that each of our hearts perpetually create wage war against us, and we must come to grips with that reality. To ignore the battle you are in will only bring you harm.

The second thing you must understand about this battle you are in is that it is a battle over your trust. This is the battle that has been going on from the beginning, ever since Satan got us to doubt God and put our trust in his word instead. Rather than believing God's word to us that eating from the forbidden tree would lead to our death, we chose to place our faith in Satan's word, which said, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,

knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). The question posed to each of us as we seek to demolish our idols is this: Where will you put your trust? Your hope? Your security? Will you put your faith in Jesus Christ, and all that he has promised to be for you, or will you trust another? The “fight of the faith” that Paul calls us to engage in, in 1 Timothy 6:12, is a fight to trust Christ more than we trust anything or anyone else.

The third thing you need to know about this battle is that our enemy’s strategy in this battle is to lie to us through our desires. You see, if the battle we are in is over where we put our trust, then it makes sense, doesn’t it, that the tactic used to defeat us would be to get us to misplace that trust? The way that your soul is attacked in this battle is through the enemy’s use of lies that you can choose to believe. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4:22 that the sin that is a part of us is “corrupt through deceitful desires.” The desires that we find within us are deceitful. They do not tell us the truth, but they lie to us about what is good for us and what we need. This is how they wage war against you, by leading you to believe the false promises of idols that can never provide you what you really need, but are only poison to your soul. The author of Hebrews likewise cautions us against being hardened by the “deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13). Sin is deceitful. It leads us to believe lies instead of the truth. This is our adversary’s primary strategy in this battle we are in: to persuade you to trust in the lies that idols offer.

Strategies for the Battle

Aim for the heart

So what is our strategy in this battle? How can we demolish the idols that we find in our hearts in order to pursue undivided devotion to Jesus Christ? I want to offer four strategies for engaging in this battle. And the first is this: aim for the heart. In a battle, your goal is to kill your enemy, not merely wound it. In Colossians 3:5, Paul calls us to “put to death therefore what is earthly in you.” He does not tell us to play nice with our sin, or to hurt it but leave it alive so it can recover. No, he tells us to kill it; to take its life away. In order for us to do this, then, we need to get at the source of its life. We need to get to the heart of it. In order for you to remove the idols from your hearts, what you need to be able to do is to move past the surface-level problems that you see. There may be an obvious surface-level idol in your life that you are aware of. Maybe you recognize money as an idol for you. Learning to part with that idol will require that you learn to give your money away, but it will also require that you search beyond that desire for money in order to discern what deeper idol you may be seeking through money. So ask yourself, “How would my life be different for the better if I had all the money my heart desires?” Your answer to that question may reveal to you your deeper idol.¹ If your answer to that question is that you would be able to make more decisions for yourself if you had lots of money, then your deeper idol may be one of control. You believe that only with the steering wheel in your own two hands can you be satisfied. If, on the other hand, your answer to the question is that with money you would finally be able to secure more friends or relationships, then maybe the deeper idol is one of approval. You cannot be

¹ This concept of “surface idols” and “deep idols” is taken from Tim Keller’s book, *Counterfeit Gods*. Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*. New York: Dutton, 2009. 64-66.

content unless you have the approval of other people, and you believe that money can provide that approval for you. Whatever the surface idols are in your life, do some serious thinking about what lies underneath them. Understanding your idols and the temptations they send your way is a crucial part of getting the victory in your battle against them. The Puritan pastor-theologian from the 17th century, John Owen, who is well known for his writings on the “mortification”, or the killing, of sin, had this to say about understanding our own sin:

We need to be intimately acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions which give lust its success. This is how men deal with their enemies. They search out their plans, ponder their goals, and consider how and by what means they have prevailed over them in the past. Then they can be defeated. Without this kind of strategic thinking, warfare is very primitive.²

In order for us to battle against the idols in our lives, we need, therefore, to move beyond “primitive” methods of fighting. Getting accountability software for your computer if you struggle with pornography is crucial if you are to fight against that idol, yes, but that is primitive warfare if you are not understanding what, for you, makes that temptation so powerful. So aim for the heart of your idols.

Be on your guard

This leads to the second strategy for battling idols: be on your guard! A part of understanding your idol is recognizing that it is never gone for good in this life. We are in this battle for as long as we live, so we must take heed of Paul’s words when he urges the Galatians, “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal 6:1). Are you aware when your heart begins to drift away from Christ and towards an idol for satisfaction? Pastor Samuel Rutherford wrote in 1637: “Holy fear is a searching of the camp, that there be no enemy within our bosom to betray us, and a seeing that all be fast and sure.”³ How skilled are you in searching the camp of your own heart for traitors? After committing serious sins, people often will say something like, “I didn’t even see it coming. One minute I was minding my own business, and the next minute I was doing this thing I never thought I’d do.” Have you found yourself caught off guard by temptation, and suddenly it’s like your heart has already taken the bait and you’re hooked? What we need to do is to learn to “see it coming”; not the temptation itself necessarily, for we can’t always look into our future and know when we’ll be tempted, but we need to be able to recognize when we are weak, so that when temptation comes it does not catch us off guard.

In order to be on guard, then, you should learn to be able to gauge your spiritual temperature at any given time of your day. Ask yourself questions like, “How am I feeling right now? Am I sad, lonely, scared, anxious, or angry?” Being able to identify how you are feeling is not simply some irrelevant skill that only counselors and

² John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. Puritan Paperbacks. Carlisle, Penn: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004. 37.

³ Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*. Puritan Paperbacks. Carlisle, Penn: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973. 103.

psychologists concern themselves with. It is, rather, an extremely useful tactic for battling the sin in your life. Don't be caught off guard by your feelings! If you can't even recognize that your heart is sad, you will be much more vulnerable to the temptation to create an idol to relieve your sadness. Food, sexual pleasure, entertainment—all can commonly be used as idols to take away your feelings of sadness, when what you should be doing is acknowledging your pain, and then lifting it up to the Lord to find help from him. Learn to discern not just your emotions, but how strong or weak your faith in Christ is with the emotions you are experiencing. Take whatever is going on inside of you and bring it through prayer, or even journaling, to the Lord, as we see David do over and over again in the Psalms. This is an important part of being on your guard against idolatry.

Use the right weapons

The third strategy for battling idols is this: use the right weapons. Aiming at the heart of your idols, and being on guard against your idols, will ultimately be pointless if the weapons you are holding are the wrong ones. Coming at your enemy with a pair of chopsticks will do no good if your aim is to pierce his heart. What you need is not chopsticks, but a sword. In Ephesians 6:17, Paul instructs believers to take up just such a weapon: “and take up the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The sword that you wield in the battle against your idols is the word of God. Since our enemy's weapons against us are *lies*, it only makes sense that our weapon to fight would be the *truth* of God's word. So, you've done some introspection and understand the heart of your idolatry and how to be on guard against it. Now what? You strike it with the sword of God's truth. So, you're feeling discouraged about what you believe people think of you, and you're tempted to place your faith there, to put your hope in an idol of people's approval. That temptation comes at your heart like knife, with the promise: “if you get these people's approval, then you'll be alright; then, and only then, will you be secure and happy.” When a temptation like that comes to you, when it wages war against your soul, what I am calling you to is to not sit down and take it! Don't think you're at the beach, when there's an enemy cutting away at your soul. Fight! Take a promise from God's word that addresses the lie you are being cut with. Pick up your sword at that moment and preach to yourself a truth like this one: “This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps 56:9-11). God's word is not full of useless information to fill your brains with; it is filled with glorious truth and promises to be used in the battle. As you seek to demolish the idols of your heart, learn to fight against the promises they make with the superior promises of God's word. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that all the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus. What this means is that Jesus Christ secured and purchased every good promise that the Bible has to offer for your present and future. Since God already gave his only Son for you, he will not hesitate to also give you everything else you need to live a life devoted to him. The war has been won already at the cross! This is the good news. Christ has won the victory, now we must continue to fight the remaining battles until he returns, using his own word to us as our primary weapon. So let me ask you: how well do you know how to handle your sword? Know this book! Spend time in it everyday, seeking to know better and better the glorious God and Savior that it is about. If you find that you are having no success in the

battle against your idols, my question is, are you using your weapon? There is no better weapon against sin than getting a spiritual sight of the glory of Jesus Christ through his word.

Don't fight alone

Finally, in strategizing for the battle you are in, don't fight alone. This will be covered in more detail in a later study, but for now hear again the words of Hebrews 3:13: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." In the battle against sin's lies, we must have the Church, "one another," to help us. The Christian life was not meant to be lived alone, just as earthly battles are not fought alone. In the movie *Gladiator*, Russell Crowe's character, Maximus, says to his fellow gladiators when they are in the middle of the colosseum, "Whatever comes out of these gates, we've got a better chance of survival if we work together. Do you understand? If we stay together we survive." The same is true in our battle. If you are struggling with an idol in your life, don't keep it solely to yourself. Bring in other brothers or sisters who can pray for you, talk with you, help you figure out the deeper issues, and exhort you with the message of the gospel.

The battle we as Christians find ourselves in is no less real than those depicted in movies or occurring throughout the world we live in. In the battle we are in, however, our very souls are at stake. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood," Paul tells us, but we do wrestle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Therefore, understanding this battle, and knowing our strategy for the fight is vital if we are to know the eternal joy of devotion to Christ.