

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE WILDERNESS

Week 3: The Mirage of Idols versus The Oasis of Worship

Main Idea of Series: The wilderness isn't a waste when it leads to deeper faith in God and a bigger view of God.

Week 1: God's Power to Part the Waters (Exodus 13-14; the Red Sea crossing)

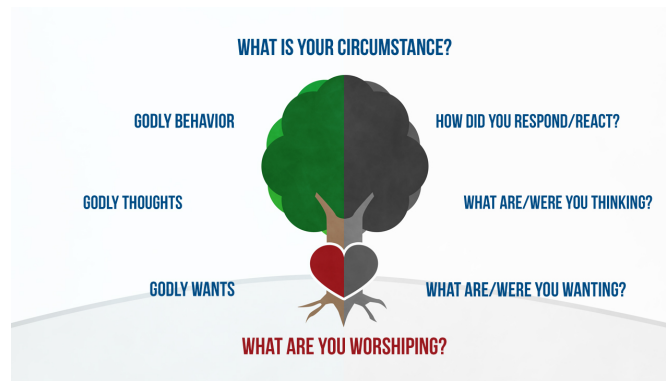
Week 2: God's Provision and Daily Grace to Battle Worry (Exodus 16; the daily manna)

Week 3: God's Life-Giving Oasis versus the Mirage of Idols (Exodus 32; the golden calf)

"Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." (1 Cor. 10:6)

Overview of Idolatry

While we might observe sins on the surface (example: an angry comment), underneath that is an idol of the heart (example: idol of comfort). The wilderness—test, trial, or temptation—doesn't create our idols or sin, but it can reveal them. Fighting sin is then like removing weeds, you not only pluck out what's on the surface but you have to do the harder work of digging out the roots.



This diagram helps us see behaviors and thoughts are rooted in our desires and worship, whether we worship the true God or false gods. We get fixated on the fruit—good or bad—but what's more foundational is the root.

"Idols aren't just stone statues. No, idols are the thoughts, desires, longings, and expectations that we worship in the place of the true God. Idols cause us to ignore the true God in search of what we think we need." Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*

"What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give ...

An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.' There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*." Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*

"I still think, *If I only had _____, I'd finally be happy*. What fills in the blank is a little different depending on my season of life or even the circumstances of my day, but I repeat the same error over and over. I think something temporary will solve something eternal. This is perhaps Satan's greatest hit." Jared Wilson, *The Gospel According to Satan*

Context: God's Commands (Exodus 20-31)

- God's commands aren't a random set of rules. After God rescues Israel from four-hundred years of slavery to Egypt, he must teach them how to live in a way that reflects his glory and is for their good. His commands are a good King's law for his citizens, but also a father's loving instructions to his children.
- God forbids worshipping other gods or creating idols (Ex. 20:2-6). God alone is worthy of our worship, trust, and allegiance. God will continue to guide, care for, provide for, and protect them. They don't need idols because God will be everything they need.
- The incident of the golden calf isn't isolated, but follows upon the prior events of God's faithfulness to them (Exodus 12-18) and God's commands for them (Exodus 20). Their idolatry in Exodus 32 is set in stark contrast to the proper response to who God is and how he has treated them.

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32)

1) Idols tell us they can give us something God can't or hasn't.

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" (Exodus 32:1)

- **Idols offer to fulfill our heart's desires apart from God and his designs.**
 - Gen. 3. This fruit of the tree can give you knowledge and make you like God.
 - Ex. 32. God has left you in the wilderness, but another god might lead you to safety and abundance.
- **Idols reveal our impatience and discontentment with God.**

They were impatient and tired of waiting (*Moses delayed*).

They were discontent and want another god to do what God isn't (*make us gods to go before us*).

The people grow weary of waiting on God. They don't like God's timing or his delay, and they are again growing hungry. They're unhappy with his plan and provision. They want to move to greener pastures and will look to idols in hope they can give them what they want.

- **Idols aim to entrap us, but God shows us our idols to free us from them.**

Though this process can be uncomfortable or painful, God's intentions are good. He aims to heal us, not hurt us or withhold good. His goal isn't to catch us in our sin but release us from our sin. The wilderness isn't a waste when seeing our idols leads to fleeing from them and returning to God.

Diagnostic Questions

1. What do I think or feel like God hasn't given me or done for me yet that I need or should have?
2. Is there anything in my life right now that I would sin to get or sin if I don't get it?
3. Where am I growing impatient with God, and why?
4. Is there something in my life that God is not doing fast enough or the way I like and I try to step in—looking to myself or something else—to get what I want?
5. What do I need to wait on God to do or provide? How can I be still and rest in him during this season? What do I need to remember is true about him or his promises to help me be still?
6. What is the better gift or deeper joy God might want for me instead of this idol? If God wants to remove this idol from my grip, what does he want to replace it with?

2) Idolatry is false worship and misplaced trust that belong to God.

- We are never not worshipping. Since we are always worshipping something, it will either be gods or God. There's not neutral-zone or off-switch when it comes to worship in our hearts.
- Idolatry robs God of his glory by giving something else the credit, attention, or trust only God deserves.

“And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Ex. 32:4)

Because idols are deceptive, what happens is we believe our idol is what satisfies me, has given me a sense of control in the past, or pleasure, security, or happiness.

- We believe money, possessions, savings or our employment provides our security in this life so we turn to them rather than God.
- We believe worldly pleasures will make us happy or satisfy us so we give in to temptation.
- We believe control will provide a measure of peace, comfort, or power so we turn to taking control, pushing others to the side, scanning the internet for answers, or giving in to worry.
- We believe reaching the top or gaining the respect of others will provide the feeling of significance of self-worth, so ambition drives us to do more or be more.

Our Enemy wants to blame God for anything we don't like in our life but give idols the credit for anything good. (See Hosea 2:7-8 where Gomer wants to return to her idols because she wrongly thinks they were the ones who gave her gifts when it was really Hosea—representing God.) We must see past the mirage to what's actually going on.

- God can and does provide the things we need and long for. Idolatry is a sad irony where we turn from the only One who can give us our desires. It's fleeing an oasis for the mirage.

3) Idolatry can be reflexive or habitual.¹ It takes deep work to retrain our responses in trials.

“Our idolatries are less like conscious decisions to believe a falsehood and more like learned dispositions to hope in what will disappoint. Our idolatries are not intellectual; they are affective—instances of disordered love and devotion. Idolatry is caught more than it is taught. We practice our way into idolatries, absorb them from the water in which we swim. Hence our idolatries often reflect the ethos of our environments.”²

- In the wilderness (Ex. 32), Israel returns to the practices and beliefs absorbed in Egypt and the habits they've created—grumbling, unbelief, and idol worship.
- Many of our idols are conscious choices but reflexive responses. It's a quick movement of the heart, and the more we do it and the more we develop the habit of it, the more instinctual and internal it will be. As idolatry becomes our default response it becomes harder and harder to resist or form new habits.
- We must be all the more intentional and diligent to fight idolatry by turning to God, and creating habits and rhythms to do so in the areas we're most tempted to turn to something other than God.

¹ See Drew Dyck, *Your Future Self Will Thank You*, to learn more about how our habits relate to discipleship and sanctification.

² James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 82.

4) **Idolatry is alluring but empty.**

- Idols cannot do what they claim. They write checks they can't cash. An idol is a shiny mirage full of promises that allure us but they always fail to deliver.
- Idols are compelling but they're deceptive, destructive, and disappointing. Idolatry replaces God's good and true promises with their own offers, though they are hollow and empty. Idols always eventually lead to unhappiness, pain, emptiness, dissatisfaction, and restlessness.
- Consider the mirage behind an idol. Don't just see the shiny worm bobbing; see the hook ready to snag you. What do I see or feel that's alluring, and how is it that a false promise or a pain-filled road? Look past the idol and be honest about the aftermath of choosing it, both in the near-term and long-term. Go to higher-ground and see the angle from God's vantage rather than from the desert's floor.

5) **Idolatry is subtle, deceptive, and easily justified.**

We justify our idols with a dash of truth. Idolatry begins with good things or has an element of truth to it, and can even be justified when there's a bit of truth or "religion" mixed in. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick." (Jer. 17:9)

"When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.'" (Ex. 32:5)

Aaron likely helps justify creating the golden calf by saying it's a feast to the Lord, though God has clearly forbidden making images to represent him. We bend God's rules and desires to fit more with our desires, and justify it because there's an element of truth or religion to it.

Think of how we justify idols like a political party or candidate, families, pleasure, possessions, or even getting our way (to do good or help others, of course) under the guise of our faith.

- We are quick to make excuses for our idolatry rather than confessing it for what it is.
"And Aaron said, 'Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil... So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.'" (Ex. 32:22, 24)

6) **Fight idolatry with worship of God. Feed on what satisfies rather than what leaves you hungry.**

- Because idolatry is a worship issue and flows out of the desires of our heart, we push back against false worship (idolatry) and misplaced desires by worshipping and desiring satisfaction in the true and living God. We must fight sin not only at the level of external temptation but—especially—with our inner temptations.
- Yes, we do resist temptations on the surface, but to really fight idols we have to uncover the hidden desires of the heart that give power to the temptations. Fight at the root-level and not only the fruit-level.
Example: While it's helpful for someone tempted by lust or pornography—or any sexual impurity—to fight by setting up accountability and avoiding unhealthy situations, this alone does not change our heart. Therefore, they must also get to the root of their desires (whether it be for intimacy, avoiding loneliness, escape, pleasure, feeling known, etc.) and then redirect those desires to a good and proper end (such as satisfaction in God and His God-given gifts in our life for our joy).
- Because sin is a worship issue rooted in our heart's desire for joy, we ultimately obliterate idolatry by worshipping and enjoying God. As God becomes bigger and more satisfying, idols become smaller and less appealing. Temptations can be resisted when the heart is full(filled) from feasting on Jesus.

Recommended Resources

- **Idolatry in the OT:** Gen 3:1-7; Lev. 26:1; Josh 24:2; Ps. 115:5-8; Ezek. 14:1-11; Is. 44:9-20.
- **Idolatry in the NT:** Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 10:7, 14; Eph. 5:5; Phil. 3:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:9; James 4:1-2; 1 Jn. 2:15-17; 5:21.
- **Books on Idolatry:** *Gospel Treason* by Brad Bigney; *Idols of the Heart* by Elyse Fitzpatrick; *Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller; *Idols of a Mother's Heart* by Christina Fox; *We Become What We Worship* by G.K. Beale; *Identity and Idolatry* by Richard Lints.
- [“4 Reasons God Ordains Sufferings for His People”](#) by Brian Cosby at thegospelcoalition.org
- [“The Pain of Broken Idols & the Path to Finding Hope: Comparing Two Songs”](#) by Dustin Crowe at indycrowe.com; See also [“Two Very Different Ways to Live”](#) and [“Ingratitude Leading to Idolatry”](#)
- [“Desert Wondering: What Are the Idols in My Life?”](#) by Charity Singleton Craig at charitysingletoncraig.com
- [“When Moses Made a Cocktail,”](#) by J. A. Medders at jamedders.com
- [“5 Insights into Idolatry”](#) and [“Dismantling Your Heart Idols”](#) by J.D. Greear at jdgreear.com
- [“Why Idolatry Was and Is Attractive?”](#) by Kevin DeYoung at thegospelcoalition.org
- [“Beware the Idol of Parenting Success”](#) by Christina Fox at thegospelcoalition.org
- [“You Become What You Trust”](#) by Brianna Lambert at gcdiscipleship.com
- [“20 Idol Crushing Questions by Tim Keller”](#) by J. A. Medders at jamedders.com

Questions to Recognize Idols

- 1) How do you know, or what questions can you ask to discern, if a *good* desire has become an idol?
- 2) What are some idols prominent in our own culture today? What are some potential idols in the church today?
- 3) Think about money. How might money be an idol in your heart? How might “money issues” surface deeper idols in the heart?
- 4) When you're tempted by idolatry (including self-worship) how might you do a “throne check” to see who's truly ruling in your life?
- 5) What are the things you think about, look forward to, spend money on, give time and energy towards the most? What do you fear being taken, missing out on, or losing?
- 6) When do you feel most frustrated, angry, or disappointed?
- 7) What are some idols in your life right now? What are the things (including yourself) that are competing with the authority, affections, and attention in your heart? Where do you see that idol showing up?
- 8) What do you look to for satisfaction, significance, security, or safety?

Questions to Diagnose Idols. Tim Keller, *Counterfeit God*.

“Life only has meaning/I only have worth if...

1. I have power and influence over others.” (Power Idolatry)
2. I am loved and respected by _____.” (Approval Idolatry)
3. I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life.” (Comfort idolatry)
4. I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____.” (Control idolatry)
5. people are dependent on me and need me.” (Helping Idolatry)
6. someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.” (Dependence idolatry)
7. I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.”
(Independence idolatry)
8. I am highly productive and getting a lot done.” (Work idolatry)
9. I am being recognized for my accomplishments, and I am excelling in my work.”
(Achievement idolatry)
10. I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.” (Materialism idolatry)
11. I am adhering to my religion’s moral codes and accomplished in its activities.” (Religion idolatry)
12. This one person is in my life and happy to be there, and/or happy with me.” (Individual person idolatry)
13. I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and am living by a self-made morality.”
(Irreligion idolatry)
14. My race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.” (Racial/cultural idolatry)
15. A particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.” (Inner ring idolatry)
16. My children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me.” (Family idolatry)
17. Mr. or Ms. “Right” is in love with me.” (Relationship Idolatry)
18. I am hurting, in a problem; only then do I feel worthy of love or able to deal with guilt.”
(Suffering idolatry)
19. my political or social cause is making progress and ascending in influence or power.”
(Ideology idolatry)
20. I have a particular kind of look or body image.” (Image idolatry)