Counselor’s Corner

Idolatry

What’s the Shape of Your Idol?

By Dr. Glenn R. McElhinney

What comes to your mind when you hear the word idol? Most likely you think of a piece of wood that’s been carved into a statue or an image on a pole that is erected outside of a pagan temple. If that is what comes to mind then an article on idolatry will not seem relevant in the 21st century. An idol is much more than some “graven image.”

Exodus 20:3-6:
3 "You shall have no other gods before me. 4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

What Does An Idol Look Like?
The following definition of an idol will facilitate our thoughts as we discuss the concept of idolatry. “An idol is a man-made object that is worshiped in some way. More specific terms include:

• Cult image, a religion-neutral term for a man-made object that is venerated for the deity, spirit or demon that it embodies or represents.
• Idolatry, a term used in religion for the non-monotheism worship of cult images, termed idols.
• Idolization (verb: to idolize): as an excessive admiration, devotion, envy or attachment to a person or thing.”

An idol is a man-made object that is worshiped in some way. This broadens the stereotypical concept of just some carved image. The truth is that this definition – a man-made object – allows for my car, house, power tools, vacation home, my favorite recliner, boat, gourmet cooking pots, professional accomplishments and the church that I attend to be an idol. You get the point.

Idolatry then is the worship of these objects. Have you thought of ______________ as an idol when you were sitting in first grade Sunday School class hearing a lesson on the Ten Commandments. I always wondered what an idol and graven image were. Understanding that an idol is more than just a carved image and can include an excessive admiration, devotion, envy or attachment to a person or thing, my thoughts are different now than during that first grade Sunday School class. The concept of idolatry is relevant to us today!

The implication is that you and I are no different than the Israelites. In pursuit of the Christian walk if there are things and people that you have an excessive admiration or attachment to that God is not always first in your life. You are a Christian idolater. Once you recover from being slapped in the face with the reality of biblical truth, be honest and name your idol out loud. If you have more than one name them all out loud so you can hear yourself say it. Name it and claim it as your own. It is true. Only when you do this will you take seriously how your worship of an object or person explains why your relationship with God is so dry and empty. Being an idolater simply means that your focus of worship is something other than Jehovah God.
Often, you think of these objects of worship as blatant sins such as sexual lust, immorality of all kinds, drugs, alcohol, greed, envy and the like. Given that an idol can be anything that replaces God, it allows that an idol could be what we would perceive as some “good things,” even godly things. There have been people in my office that state, “all we desire is a good Christian marriage,” but their understanding, expectation and the extent to which they pursue that “good Christian marriage” is idolatry. There have been similar experiences with parents wanting to raise “good Christian kids.” There is nothing wrong with desiring to have a good Christian marriage or to raise good Christian kids, but the focused pursuit to make those desires a reality becomes a demand and a need in their lives. Once you go beyond a biblical desire and do not leave the outcome to God, you are on the slippery slope of idolatry.

The slippery slope is a six-phase progression:
1. **Desire:** “I want.” Nothing wrong with this thought. God tells us to make are requests known to Him.

2. **Demand:** “I must.” The desire is no longer an expression of love for God and man, but something I crave for myself. The desire has now become selfish and self-serving.

3. **Need:** “I will.” Something desirable is now seen as essential. I am convinced that I cannot live without it. I begin to deceive myself about the difference between a desire and a need.

4. **Expectation:** “You should.” This is where my relationships begin to be affected. If I really believe that this is a need that it is essential to me, then it seems right to expect that you will meet my need if you really love me. This becomes a manipulative test to see if people in my life really love and care for me. Then they should meet my need without question.

5. **Disappointment:** “You didn’t.” Here the anger breaks out and becomes personal. You are standing in the way of what rules my heart.

6. **Punishment:** “Because you didn’t, I will….” I respond to you in anger (silent treatment, hurtful words, vengeance or violence.

A psychological way to refer to these intense pursuits of even the “good things” would be labeled an obsession. The reality is that you can dress up our good and godly obsessions to make them appear as if there is nothing wrong with what and how you are pursuing these good things. For good measure, you probably have a few Bible verses attached to the idolatry and a few people praying for you.

**Unsure if You Have an Idol? Consider the Effects of Idolatry**

**Disappointment**
There have been many people over the years sit in my office and wonder why their life is a mess; why God is so distant; why God does not answer their prayers. The answer is both simple and complicated. Simply, if God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all it contains, is not their object of worship then their life will be less than what it could be. Any object of worship less than God will have its imperfections and will only be able to deliver the value of what the object is worth.
If your object of worship is a luxury car, it will only be luxurious for a certain period of time. It will depreciate the minute you drive off the lot! Then there will be the first ding, dent, or coffee spilled and then something will need to be repaired. The new car smell is long gone and you will have one of those fragrance trees hanging from your mirror! This depreciating object of worship will continue to give you less pleasure until it is an object of aggravation and resentment. You will eventually get rid of your object of worship and replace it with a new one. The cycle of worship begins again with ultimately the same outcome. This is the futility of worshiping something less than God. This scenario can be the same for a new house; new job, new spouse; new location; new church; new you; and new friends. The thing common to all of these objects of worship is that they all are inherently imperfect and have no ability to give or provide unconditional love, joy or peace. Only God can provide those things.

**Discontentment**

The end result of having false objects of worship is discontentment and dissatisfaction. The reason for your discontentment with the false objects of worship is the false expectation(s) you have of what that object will do for you. What pleasure does one expect from it? What does it ultimately give? Less than expected. Always.

Objects of worship, other than God, will always give less than you expect. Only God knows what your true need is and only He can meet that true need. This is why people and things fail you. Not because they are imperfect (which they are) but because you expect them with their sinful elements to perfectly meet your needs, demands, and unrealistic expectations. This mindset is nothing but selfishness. You seek personal security in objects that have no ability to make you emotionally secure. Your hope is placed in the wrong things.

**Why could Paul say that he was content?**

**Philippians 4:11-12**

“11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

Paul could say this because his hope and object of worship was the Lord not his material possessions or people. Because his hope was in the One who could meet his real need he was content with what the Lord provided him. His expectation was that God would provide for what he needed, not what he wanted. Whether that was little or much, Paul was content. Now that does not mean that he stuck his head in the sand and spiritualized his imprisonments, lack of food or being abandoned by his co-workers and friends. Paul experienced the realities of a sinful world but his object of worship, his hope, was in the One who controls, knows, and provides all things. How different from the way many people in our culture and in the church, respond today.

When you look at and experience the advertising in our culture it clearly is intentionally designed to make you discontent with what you have. The goal is to create an image of their product so you will no longer desire the thing that you have but rather want the thing that is currently being promoted. It is purposefully designed to create dissatisfaction in your life. If they do their job you will agree with them that you are dissatisfied with what you have and agree that you will be better off if you have their product or a newer version of what you already have.
We struggle to live with Paul’s attitude “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.” Are you content with your current cell phone; the calling plan; the style and whether or not yours is a smart phone? How about your cable company or do you have a dish? Even brokerage firms are appealing to your goal of having a better portfolio by offering you something with their firm that you are not getting from your current broker. We live in a culture that is obsessed with things and thrives on discontentment.

This discontentment even applies to churches and your worship experience. In your spiritual pride, you think that either the old hymns of the faith are a better expression of worship and more pleasing to God, or the new contemporary expressions of worship are more pleasing to God. It is odd how your desire to worship God in spirit and in truth can become an idol. No wonder we have difficulty recognizing our idolatry. It is in the fabric of our everyday living. It is just “natural” to be discontent. Because of this you do not experience a true and deep relationship with the living God.

**Loss of Identity**

Often as you worship other gods your identity can become attached to those gods. If you are worshiping the opinions of others or attempting to be all things to all people so that you feel that you fit in with a particular group of people, you lose your own personal identity. You lose who God has designed and created you to be. You lose the opportunity to fit into the Kingdom of God where He has designed you to fit. Despite all your efforts you become more dissatisfied and angry with life and people because you do not feel fulfilled.

Ultimately attempting to conform to the opinions and expectations of others in order to be valued is to reject how God designed you. You are rejecting His plan and purpose for you. In aggressive ways and passive aggressive ways, you debate with God and put vast amounts of emotional energy into proving Him wrong and you right. It is a battle you will never win. When you recognize you are in a losing battle you have two options. Accept who God has made you to be and repent of your anger and rebelliousness, or dig your heels in deeper to prove you are right despite the obvious. Your life is getting worse not better, yet you persist in deceiving yourself.

You are the person the Bible speaks of in Deuteronomy 29:19. The context is God’s renewal of His covenant with Israel under the leadership of Moses. Deuteronomy 29:19 states: “19 When someone hears the words of this oath, he may consider himself exempt* ‘I will have peace even though I follow my own stubborn heart.’ This will lead to the destruction of the well-watered land as well as the dry land.” *(Lit. may bless himself in his heart – thinking/mind)*

Notice the focus is on the mind and how one thinks. The deceived mind twists what it hears from God and genuinely believes that even though a person acknowledges that they are going the wrong way they will somehow avoid the inevitable disaster. They are headed for utter ruin yet their deceived heart and mind convinces them it will not be so. This condition of a deceived heart is reflected in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

**Inevitable Outcome of Idolatry**

Over my years of counseling I have been amazed by how many people knowingly head the
wrong direction willing to “sell their souls” to be valued by an individual, an organization (including the church), or a set of standards that have been established by another fallen, broken, sinful person or group of people. The person who falls into this hole of seeking validation from others rather than God, does not fit a stereotype as many would think. This person ranges from the apparently needy to the very successful professional who hides his neediness. This deep need is no respecter of persons. The belief is: everyone is in some way better than they are or has an ability, look or persona that they do not have. They are also sure that if “they had it” they would fit in, feel good about themselves, be accepted as they have always wanted (lusted for) and be content with life. They are also sure that people will now accept them unconditionally. They will now feel and believe (falsely) that they have arrived and gotten what they have longed for.

All of this is a false pursuit to escape who God has made you to be. You lust and covet another person’s gifts, appearance, job status, seemingly ideal life, spiritual walk and many other things. You do this believing that you would be better off, lead a more fulfilled life and finally be content, if you had what they had. You will never be content or feel more fulfilled until you submit and accept: 1) how God has designed you and 2) the place He has for you in His Kingdom. It is what I call the David moment. David said in Psalm 139:14: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” David had come to the point that he had accepted how he was designed by God; how he was designed to be and not to be. He was, as we all are, designed not to have everything. He, like us, was designed with and without certain things Why? Because God designed someone else to be and to have those things.

In the New Testament. As Pau taught in 1 Corinthians 12, the point of the diversity of the gifts in the Body of Christ, as taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, is that God has designed some as hands; some as eyes; some as feet; some as ears; and so on. The point is that no one is designed to have it all. God intentionally designed you with deficiencies. You are designed to be interdependent, on others and on God, and to appreciate your God given abilities. You are not to worship and lust after someone else’s abilities and what they have. You are designed to fulfill a very specific purpose in the Kingdom of God. David’s acknowledgement and acceptance of who he was, was a praise not a complaint. This praise included who he was not. Until you come to the place where you can honestly praise God in thankfulness for how you are designed, you will struggle with self-acceptance, joy, personal peace and contentment. David’s praise is the antithesis of idolizing something you are not, or do not have. Think about it.

**Final Thoughts**

When we worship someone or something other than God our hearts and minds become deceived to the truth of God’s Word. Satan’s subtle work begins to move in and we exchange the truth of God for a lie. The apostle Paul speaks to this very issue of false worship and the outcome in Romans 1:21-25: “21For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles. 24 Therefore God delivered them over in the cravings of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served something created instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

In the context of this article the passage from Romans is almost self-explanatory. Basically,
people knew God but did not glorify Him. The result was nonsensical thinking and having minds that were darkened. They exchanged the glory of God for images. The result of this was that God turned them over to their cravings. The synopsis of this passage is that by exchanging the truth for a lie they served something created and not the Creator.

Take an honest look at your life, whom do you serve? The created or the Creator?

**Endnotes:**

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