



*“You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods.”*

**- Exodus 20:3-5a**

# Week 2

## Knocking Down the Idols

Perhaps nothing in the Bible is more often condemned than idolatry. God was jealous for his people (“*You are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession.*” – **Deuteronomy 14:2**).

He knew that among other things, idolatry threatened to rob Him of intimate relationship with his chosen people. “*You cannot serve two masters,*” Jesus reminded his followers in **Matthew 6**. “*You will hate the one and love the other, or you’ll be devoted to one and despise the other.*” The same is true for us today.

The word “idol” normally conjures up images of carved wooden statues, little Buddhas, or Hindu shrines. But what does idolatry look like in today’s Western culture? Not many of us would bow down and pray to a statue or a golden calf, so do we modern-day believers still have an issue with idolatry?

Idolatry can take on two forms in the modern church: Things we cherish above God and false images we create of God. Today we will explore the first kind of idol. On day two, we will look at the second kind.

In “Counterfeit Gods,” author and pastor Tim Keller defines an idol this way: “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.”

### Day 1 – What is an Idol?

Read **Ephesians 5:5** and **Colossians 3:5**. What does Paul say an idolater worships? What is the consequence?

**Ephesians 5:5:** “*You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.*”

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**Colossians 3:5:** “*So, put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don’t be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.*”

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Our hearts are wired for worship (think of a rock concert or a sporting event). But idol worship can also be subtle, so subtle that we often don't even realize an idol is running our lives. Idols are often those things we can depend on, so we set our hearts on them.

Relationships	Food	Exercise/Fitness
Work	Image	Comfort/Leisure
Independence	Possessions	Romance
Reputation	Power	Physical Appearance
Wealth	Knowledge	Politics
Success	Alcohol	Control
Children		

1. Can you think of other things that vie for your allegiance? If so list them here.

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2. When our hearts elevate things above God, every area of our lives can be affected. Perhaps this explains why the warnings against idolatry come so often and so seriously in the Bible. God doesn't want us to miss out on anything good that He has stored up for us. Write out **Jonah 2:8**:

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3. The New English Translation (NET) says it like this: "*Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs.*" Read **Ezekiel 14:1-3**. Write out verse 3.

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4. Underline where the idols were erected.

» What did the Lord say the idols would cause the people to do?

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» How do these verses suggest idolatry might affect your prayer life?

» Read **James 4:3-4**. "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*"

» What do you think friendship with the world looks like? Can you think of any ways in which you may have unwittingly become a "friend" of the world?

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*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.”*

**- Matthew 23:27**

## **Day 2 – What is an Idol? (#2)**

Yesterday we examined how we can cherish other things above God, creating idols of possessions, relationships, and more. But there is another form of idolatry worth considering.

The Israelites were serial idolaters. Despite repeated warnings, they were often influenced to adopt the customs, behaviors, and religious practices of their neighboring nations. Many of these practices, like child sacrifice and temple prostitution, were utterly detestable to the Lord. But the people were so immersed in the culture, they often stoned and killed the prophets who called them to repent. God, in his mercy, was trying to rescue the people from the consequences of their own sins, but they were blinded by life around them.

In what ways do you think our modern culture can influence us to develop ideas about God that aren’t found in scripture? Hint: When was the last time you heard someone say, “Well, the God I worship would never \_\_\_\_\_ ? Or this phrase: “That’s not MY God!”?

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Keller says, “If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshiping an idealized version of yourself.” This self-elevation may be one of the most rampant forms of idolatry in the West.

Instead of looking to Scripture as our standard of who God is, and who He says we are, we “create” a God who is more palatable. This God of our own creation rarely offends any of our modern sensibilities, nor does He condemn our pet sins, our lifestyle, or our political opinions. In essence, this god keeps us comfortably positioned on the throne of our own lives.

Writing in his article, “What Image of God Works for You?” for the Gospel Coalition, Erik Raymond wrote this: “This is surely a sign of the times. God is whoever we want Him to be. He is marginalized and relativized into utter obscurity. Sadly, the church today has become the spiritual equivalent of the plastic surgeon’s office. There have been attempts to recast, redefine, remold, and remix God at every turn. There is a grave difference between receiving and rejoicing in the image of the invisible God, as manifested by Christ, and updating and recasting him in our image. It is a deadly perversion to chisel a god in our image and call him Jesus. And this is the great idolatry of our day.”

1. Read **Romans 1:21**: *“Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.”*

What does Paul say caused the people’s minds to become dark and confused?

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1. Write out **Mark 7:7, NLT**.

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2. Underline what the people taught that made their worship a farce.

As followers of Jesus, we want to be seekers of truth. We don't want to worship or create a counterfeit God. Only the one true living God has the power to save us while satisfying our deepest longings. Our goal is to serve Him and only Him.

In **Matthew 16:24-26**, Jesus tells the disciples, *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life you will lose it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"*

End today by asking God to open your eyes to any idols that may need to be exposed in your life. Ask him to show you anything that you cling to more fiercely than you cling to Him. Ask Him to help you follow Him with your whole heart.

### **Day 3 – Exposing Your idols**

Since we assume idols are hiding in all our hearts, what can we do about them? How can we be set free from their influence so that we can fully experience God's mercy and will in our lives? Perhaps the first step is identifying exactly what they are and how they got there to begin with.

1. In his book, "Counterfeit Gods," Tim Keller suggests the following four questions to help you identify what's ruling your heart:
  - » What do you daydream about? Archbishop William Temple once said, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude." What do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart? When you have time to relax, where do your thoughts go?
  - » How do you spend your money? Jesus said, *"Where your treasure is, there is your heart also."* (**Matt. 6:21**) Your money flows most effortlessly toward your heart's greatest love, Keller notes. In fact, the mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you must try to exercise self-control constantly.
  - » How do you respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes? If you ask for something that you don't get, are you able to move on? Or when you pray and work for something and you don't get it, do you respond with explosive anger or deep despair? If so, then you may have found your real god.
  - » What's behind your most uncontrollable emotions? Keller suggests, if you are angry, ask, "Is there something here too important to me, something I am telling myself I have to have at all costs?" Do the same thing about strong fear or despair and guilt. Ask yourself "Am I so scared, because something is being threatened, which I think is a necessity when it is not? Am I so down on myself because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?" If you are over-working, driving yourself into the ground with frantic activity, ask yourself, "Do I feel that I must have this thing to be fulfilled and significant?"

“Your religion is what you do with your solitude.”

– Archbishop William Temple

When you ask questions like that, when you “pull your emotions up by the roots,” as it were, sometimes you will find your idols clinging to them.

2. Look up **Matthew 10:37-39**.

In this passage, Jesus directly addresses our greatest treasures. What do you think he meant when he said, “*Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” How does this relate to idolatry?

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3. In many ways, idolatry at the most basic level is really war with our flesh. We want what we want. So, we either go after what we want with all our hearts, or we create a God who is okay with whatever it is that we want. But God wants us to want what he wants!

“In **John 30:30**, John the Baptist said, *‘He must increase; I must decrease.’* The more room we give the Holy Spirit to take over our inner lives, the less we are controlled by our fleshly desires. And the greater victory we will have tearing down our idols. What Jesus suggests when He says, *‘take up your cross and follow me,’* is a daily dying to self. The bloggers at ‘One For Israel,’ a group of Messianic Jews who write from Israel, explain the concept well as they address why the spiritual discipline of fasting is so effective in a believer’s prayer life:

As Paul describes so well in **Romans 7**, there is a perpetual battle between the flesh and the spirit, and our mind moderates by making decisions about which call to obey. As human beings, we are mind, body and spirit, but spiritually dead without God. We tend to be pushed around by our fleshly desires. Our flesh is all about our relationship with ourselves and our natural physical cravings, which can become selfish and even destructive when left unchecked. Our mind can overrule our body and give us the capacity to meaningfully relate to others and the world, while our spirit communes directly with God. As we fast, we deliberately weaken the powerful bond with our flesh and strengthen our relationship with God, spirit to Spirit. But it is an exchange. There is less of us and more of Him. That is always going to be a good deal.

“Fasting is like turning the volume knob down on our flesh and turning it up in the spirit. We gain authority, clarity, and closeness with God.

“It’s a bit like moving all the furniture to the edges of the room to give the Holy Spirit room to dance and freely move, or like limiting yourself on the main course to leave more room for dessert. Less of us, more of Him. As someone once told Dwight L. Moody, changing his life from then onward: ‘The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him.’ When we agree to wholeheartedly follow Yeshua and give Him permission to change us and use us, we will find that He starts killing us off! This process of stripping down, killing off, and purifying is familiar to the saints of God, but it is necessary if we want to see His power at work in and through us. Fasting is a way of willingly taking part in this process by our own free choice, giving the Spirit more liberty in our lives.”

*Excerpted from Why Does Fasting Work? Oneforisrael.org. Used by permission.*

“What the heart trusts, the mind justifies, the emotions desire, and the will carries out. Everything follows the heart.”

- Tim Keller

1. What are some of the spiritual benefits of fasting? And how does that relate to idolatry?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
2. When we turn the volume knob down on our flesh and turn it up in the spirit, what does the author say we gain?  
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3. How might fasting from food or other activities help you identify the idols in your life?  
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### Day 4 - Burying the 'Both-And'

I once heard someone say that ridding themselves of idols is less like rearranging your living room furniture and more like playing whack-a-mole. Swift and decisive action is needed — over and over again. Confession and repentance are a great place to start. But remember, God is full of mercy, and He understands our human condition. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, so He understands our struggle. What's more, He promises to use all things in a believer's life for his good. In the following article, Jen Wilkin, speaker and teacher, ponders how crisis and suffering can help us stay free of idols and focused on Jesus. Read her story and answer the questions at the end.

#### Burying the 'Both-And' by Jen Wilkin (reprinted with permission)

Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.” (**Gen. 35:2-4**) So, they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem.

What does it take to make us cast away our idols? For Jacob, as for most of us, it takes a crisis. In the wake of his daughter's rape, Jacob's non-response invites mass bloodshed when his frustrated sons take justice into their own hands (**Gen. 34**). Desolate and chastened, Jacob renews his resolve to worship only God, commanding his household to get rid of the foreign idols in their midst. Determined to put the past behind him and live in the truth that God is his only hope, he symbolically buries the idols under an oak tree. Why there? Because it was the place idol worship was practiced. With beautiful irony, the place for idol worship becomes a burial ground for idolatry. Not until Jacob perceives his need for God does he bury his idols. Until this point, a “both-and” relationship has worked fine for him.

I can relate.

For the unbeliever, an idol is someone or something that takes the place of God in their affections. Believers, too, wrestle with idolatry, though perhaps not in the same way unbelievers

“We do not replace God with our idols — like Jacob we simply add our idols to God. And it often takes a crisis to point out our folly.”

- Jen Wilkin

do. For the believer, an idol is something that competes for our affection for God. Rather than replacing God in our thinking, an idol fills a gap in our ability to trust God. Idolatry is a “both-and” arrangement. I need God and I need my idol. I need God and I need a husband. I need God and I need outward beauty. I need God and I need my health. I need God and I need my stuff.

We do not replace God with our idols — like Jacob we simply add our idols to God. And it often takes a crisis to point out our folly.

#### **All I Need, All I Have**

The summer I turned 27, I joined my first women’s Bible study. I had just had my first baby and was feeling all the inadequacies of new motherhood. The farther into the study I got the more I became aware of my complacency toward the things of God. I clearly remember praying and asking God to show me He was all I needed — not a career, not the approval of peers, not high-school skinny, not a double income, just Him. As has always been the case, God’s faithfulness exceeded my request.

That October, six weeks pregnant with my second child, I was diagnosed with malignant skin cancer. Though the cancer was safely removed, and I continue to have successful follow-up to this day, I learned something I had previously taken for granted: that each day is a gift from God to which I am not entitled. I learned, as A.W. Tozer says, that I am a “derived and contingent self,” dependent moment to moment on the grace of my Creator — given life by none other than God himself. I learned to put to death and bury my idols that could neither give life nor sustain it. The Lord answered more than my summer request — far better than showing me He was all I needed; He showed me He was all I had.

#### **Two Grave Robbers**

When life moves along smoothly, I forget this truth. I forget the lessons of my times of crisis. I scabble in the dirt beneath my oak tree to resurrect my idols. I begin to say again that I need God and comfort, God and financial security. I consider again the lie that my life is sustained by possessions, people, circumstances. I begin again to devote my heart, soul, mind, and strength to things that pretend to meet the needs only God can meet. When life is easy, I appear as though all is in order, but if you look closely, you’ll see the dirt beneath my fingernails.

I am a grave robber. So, though I do not look with pleasure on the prospect of trials or suffering, I acknowledge that they are for my greater good: burying what must stay buried, raising to life what God would see live. And though it is right to be thankful for times without trials, I will celebrate them circumspectly, remembering the lessons of discovering my own frailty, praying for clean hands and a pure heart, praying that the cemetery of my idolatry harbors no empty graves.

There is only one empty grave that brings life — the empty grave of Jesus, with whom I too have been buried and raised. May our worship and our work be solely devoted to the Chief Grave Robber who has stolen us from death to life. He is not merely all we need, He is all we have. And He is enough.

*Jen Wilkin is a wife, mom to four great kids, and an advocate for women to love God with their minds through the faithful study of his Word. She writes, speaks, and teaches women the Bible. She lives in Flower Mound, Texas, and her family calls The Village Church home. Jen is the author of “None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different from Us” (and Why That’s a Good Thing) (Crossway, 2016) and “Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible*

*with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds” (Crossway, 2014). You can find her at [jenwilkin.net](http://jenwilkin.net) and follow her on Twitter.*

1. What does it take for most of us to cast away our idols?

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2. How do trials expose our idolatry? How should we respond?

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3. Have you ever had an experience like the author describes?

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### **Day 5 – Create in Me a Clean Heart**

God longs for our hearts to be right before Him. He longs to show us mercy and forgiveness. He longs for relationship. No one in the Bible seemed to understand the mercy of God more than David. When confronted with his sin, he wasted no time in confessing and repenting. In fact, **Psalm 51** is one of the best expressions of repentance in all of scripture. David’s words, which so beautifully demonstrate a contrite and humble heart, have helped people throughout the ages examine their sin and experience pardon. If you need to renounce the idols in your heart, use this Psalm to help guide you through repentance, knowing that God will not reject a broken and contrite spirit.

Read **Psalm 51** in its entirety. Then use the space below to write your own confession, listing any areas where you feel like you have resisted the Holy Spirit’s control or any idols that you need to tear down. Ask God to reveal himself to you and show you any ways in which you have created your own version of God through religion or selfishness. Ask him to help you bury your idols once and for all.

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Write out **Psalm 32:5**.

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## Praying for each other in our BLC Group

1. Your role as the one with a need.

a. What is your major need now?

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b. Share how the need is impacting you:

Are you worried – fearful – empty – angry  
– afraid – lonely – weak – weary –  
challenged – hurt – covering up –  
something else?

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2. Your role as a BLC sister

- Hear the need. Listen for facts and feelings. List them below.
- Hear the Heart.
- Don't try to fix.
- Ask how the need is impacting her personally.
- Ask how God "could" use the need in her life to get her attention.

3. Record the personal needs of your BLC sisters.

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4. God's role as your Sovereign Father

- Confirm His love, power and presence in your life.
- Fulfill His will in your life.
- Answer your prayers appropriately.
- Give you peace.