

TALKING ABOUT IDOLATRY IN A POSTMODERN AGE

BY TIM KELLER

IDOLATRY IN THE BIBLE

When I first began reading through the Bible I looked for some unifying themes. I concluded that there are many and that if we make just one theme the theme (such as 'covenant' or 'kingdom') we run the danger of reductionism. However, one of the main ways to read the Bible is as the ages-long struggle between true faith and idolatry. In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God's name (Gen 1:26–28). Paul understands humanity's original sin as an act of idolatry: "They exchanged the glory of the immortal God...and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator"(Rom 1:21–25). Instead of living for God, we began to live for ourselves, or our work, or for material goods. We reversed the original intended order. And when we began to worship and serve created things, paradoxically, the created things came to rule over us. Instead of being God's vice-regents, ruling over creation, now creation masters us. We are now subject to decay and disease and disaster. The final proof of this is death itself. We live for our own glory by toiling in the dust, but eventually we return to the dust—the dust "wins" (Gen 3:17–19). We live to make a name for ourselves but our names are forgotten. Here in the beginning of the Bible we learn that idolatry means slavery and death.

The Ten Commandments' first two and most basic laws (one-fifth of all God's law to humankind) are against idolatry.* Exodus does not envision any third option between true faith and idolatry. We will either worship the uncreated God or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. The classic New Testament text is Romans 1:18-25. This extensive passage on idolatry is often seen as only referring to the pagan Gentiles, but instead we should recognize it as an analysis of what sin is and how it works. Verse 21 tells us that the reason we turn to idols is because we want to control our lives, though we know that we owe God everything. "Though they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him." Verse 25 tells us the strategy for control—taking created things and setting our hearts on them and building our lives around them. Since we need to worship something, because of how we are created, we cannot eliminate God without creating God-substitutes. Verses 21 and 25 tell us the two results of idolatry:

- 1) Deception—"their thinking became futile and their hearts were darkened,"and
- 2) Slavery—"they worshipped and served" created things.

Whatever we worship we will serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together. We are “covenantal” beings. We enter into covenant service with whatever most captures our imagination and heart. It ensnares us. So every human personality, community, thought-form, and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance—either to God or to some God-substitute. Individually, we will ultimately look either to God or to success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty or something else to make us feel personally significant and secure, and to guide our choices. Culturally we will ultimately look to either God or to the free market, the state, the elites, the will of the people, science and technology, military might, human reason, racial pride, or something else to make us corporately significant and secure, and to guide our choices.

No one grasped this better than Martin Luther, who ties the Old Testament and New Testament together remarkably in his exposition of the Ten Commandments. Luther saw how the Old Testament law against idols and the New Testament emphasis on justification by faith alone are essentially the same. He said that the Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. It is because the fundamental problem in law-breaking is always idolatry. In other words, we never break the other commandments without first breaking the law against idolatry. Luther understood that the first commandment is really all about justification by faith, and to fail to believe in justification by faith is idolatry, which is the root of all that displeases God.

All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, obedience, patience, and chastity of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior].... (Part X. XI) Excerpts from Martin Luther, Treatise Concerning Good Works (1520).

Here Luther says that failure to believe that God accepts us fully in Christ—and to look to something else for our salvation—is a failure to keep the first commandment; namely, having no other gods before him. To try to earn your own salvation through works-righteousness is breaking the first commandment. Then he says that we cannot truly keep any of the other laws unless we keep the first law—against idolatry and works-righteousness. Thus beneath any particular sin is this sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

For example, let’s say a person cheats on his income tax form. Why does he do that? Well, you say, because he is a sinner. Yes, but why does his sin take this form? Luther’s answer would be that the man only cheated because he was making money and possessions—and the status or comfort from having more of them—more important

than God and his favor. Or let's say a person lies to a friend rather than lose face over something she has done. In that case the underlying sin is making human approval or your reputation more important than the righteousness you have in Christ.

The Bible, then, does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and a rare sin found only among primitive people). Rather, all our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are at root idolatry—something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.

IDOLATRY IN POSTMODERN CULTURE

The biblical teaching about idolatry is particularly helpful for evangelism in a postmodern context. The typical way that Christians define sin is to say that it is breaking God's law. Properly explained, of course, that is a good and sufficient definition. But the law of God includes both sins of omission and of commission, and it includes the attitudes of the heart as well as behavior. Those wrong attitudes and motivations are usually inordinate desires—forms of idolatry. However, when most listeners hear us define sin as “breaking God's law” all the emphasis in their minds falls on the negative (sins of commission) and on the external (behaviors rather than attitudes.) There are significant reasons, then, that “law-breaking” isn't the best way to first describe sin to postmodern listeners.

I ordinarily begin speaking about sin to a young, urban, non-Christian like this:

Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.

Why is this a good path to take?

First, this definition of sin includes a group of people that postmodern people are acutely aware of. Postmodern people rightly believe that much harm has been done by self-righteous religious people. If we say “sin is breaking God's law” without a great deal of further explanation, it appears that the Pharisaical people they have known are ‘in’ and most other people are ‘out.’ Pharisees, of course, are quite fastidious in their keeping of the moral law, and therefore (to the hearer) they seem to be the very essence of what a Christian should be. An emphasis on idolatry avoids this problem. As Luther points out, Pharisees, while not bowing to literal idols, were looking to themselves and their moral goodness for their justification, and therefore they were actually breaking the first commandment. Their morality was self-justifying motivation and therefore spiritually pathological. At the bottom of all their law-keeping they were actually breaking the most fundamental law of all. When we give definitions and descriptions of sin to postmodern

people, we must do so in a way that not only challenges prostitutes to change but also Pharisees.

There is another reason we need a different definition of sin for postmodern people. They are relativists, and the moment you say, “Sin is breaking God’s moral standards,” they will retort, “Well, who is to say whose moral standards are right? Everyone has different ones! What makes Christians think that theirs are the only right set of moral standards?” The usual way to respond to this is to become sidetracked from your presentation of sin and grace into an apologetic discussion about relativism. Of course, postmodern people must be strongly challenged about their mushy view of truth, but I think there is a way to move forward and actually make a credible and convicting gospel presentation before you get into the apologetic issues. I do it this way, I take a page from Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* and I define sin as building your identity—your self-worth and happiness—on anything other than God. Instead of telling them they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends, I tell them that they are sinning because they are looking to their careers and romances to save them, to give them everything that they should be looking for in God. This idolatry leads to drivenness, addictions, severe anxiety, obsessiveness, envy of others, and resentment.

I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not offer much resistance. They doubt there is any real alternative, but they admit sheepishly that this is what they are doing. I have also found that this makes sin more personal. Making an idol out of something means giving it the love you should be giving your Creator and Sustainer. To depict sin as not only a violation of law but also of love is more compelling. Of course a complete description of sin and grace includes recognition of our rebellion against God’s authority. But I’ve found that if people become convicted about their sin as idolatry and mis-directed love, it is easier to show them that one of the effects of sin is to put them into denial about their hostility to God. In some ways, idolatry is like addiction writ large. We are ensnared by our spiritual idols just like people are ensnared by drink and drugs. We live in denial of how much we are rebelling against God’s rule just like addicts live in denial of how much they are trampling on their families and loved ones.

The biblical theme of idolatry has far more implications for ministry in a postmodern society than what we have discussed. Not only is it a key for evangelism, it is also crucial for discipling and counseling, as David Powlison has shown in his many writings on the subject. (See his easily accessible essay “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair,” available at a number of places online.)* The Dutch Calvinists have also shown that the best way to analyze cultures is by identifying their corporate idols. Indeed, each field of vocation and study has its reigning idols, as do political parties and ideologies. While secular societies have made an idol of human reason and human autonomy, other more traditional societies make idols of the family or racial purity.

In her recent memoir, *Easter Everywhere: A Memoir*, Darcey Steinke recounts how she, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, left her Christian profession. Moving to New York City she entered a life of club hopping and sexual obsession. She wrote several novels.

She continued, however, to be extremely restless and unfulfilled. In the middle of the book she quotes from Simone Weill as summarizing the main issue in her life. "One has only the choice between God and idolatry," Weil wrote. "If one denies God ... one is worshiping some things of this world in the belief that one sees them only as such, but in fact, though unknown to oneself imagining the attributes of Divinity in them."* Stephen Metcalf, writing a review of the memoir in the New York Times calls Weill's quote "extraordinary." This is testimony to how penetrating the concept of idolatry is to postmodern people.

Tim Keller
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* It could be argued that the tenth commandment against coveting is also aimed at idolatrous attitudes in the heart.

* David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 13.2 (1995).

* Darcey Steinke, *Easter Everywhere: A Memoir*, (Bloomsbury, 2007), 114.