

“How to Wreck Your Life--Idols”

I try to start the New Year with a series that launches us into a new beginning. Something that gets us thinking, that challenges us to go deeper and be better, so let's start this year with this series called, “How to Wreck Your Life!” I mean, aren't you just a little bit curious about that? We're usually all, “I want to start the year off right! I want to make some changes! I want to be better!” I'm like, “No, let's figure out how to wreck our lives! How to really mess them up good for 2012!” You in?!

Of course, nobody wants to intentionally wreck their life, and the idea is that if we know what we can do to really wreck our lives, then maybe we can tap into the power and wisdom to avoid it. If we know the traps, and can see the traps, maybe we can keep from falling into them.

In this series I'm drawing from the book *Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller, and the teaching of John Ortberg—some powerful stuff. And I want to set the stage with a question. **How many places of worship do you think there are in this country?** So if you don't mind, turn to the person next to you, just take a guess on this one. All right, according to the American Religion Data Archives' most recent survey, the number they came up with was **250,402**.

That number includes churches, synagogues, mosques, temples of all types and sizes. But my guess is that that number is really way too low. Because there are buildings near here that people will pour into tomorrow and worship. They will sit behind desks or in offices or cubicles, and some of them will find their ultimate sense of purpose and identity and worth. Some people will sacrifice, in those buildings, the best of their time, their effort, their emotional well-being, even their families...some will. That's the place where they'll give their hearts. For some people, that building where people work has actually become their place of worship. They don't know it, but that's their shrine to their god.

There is another building near here where they have a big vault where money is kept. And some people will go into that building, and their primary sense of security and safety comes from how much they have in that vault in that building. They offer sacrifices on a regular basis to the god in that building.

There is another building not far from here, where all the walls have mirrors, and the priests and priestesses dress in spandex and Under Armour. And because it's January, that temple has like five times more people than it will in February, and sometimes people are driven to distraction to please that god. Sometimes people get depressed, or have eating disorders, because we're told the way our body looks ought to be our god. We worship appearance.

For some people, their temple may be a mall, or a stadium, or a school, or a television studio. The number one-rated TV show for the last several years by far is called, interestingly, *American Idol*.

We're a worshipping people. We can't help it. We give our devotion to *somebody*. We offer our sacrifices to *something*. We look for the blessed life *somewhere*.

Now, in ancient Israel, in the ancient world, those rival gods were called idols. The gods have not gone away. They have just gotten sneaky. They just get us to sacrifice our lives to them without even knowing what we're doing.

Now, the ancient world was a world like ours, full of idols, and the Old Testament mentions several. It talks about the Canaanite god, Baal, the god of weather. And his wife, the goddess Ashtaroth a goddess associated with fertility.

There's the Babylonian god called Marduk—the god of rain and war, and, I'm not making this up, accounting! Every April 15 they would offer a cow...Marduk

Molech was another idol you read about in the Old Testament. Infant sacrifice was particularly connected to Molech.

Dagan was god of the Philistines. He was actually regarded as the father of Baal.

Then there is another god, Bieber, the god of tweenage girls and funky dance moves.

Back then, idols would be statues. Usually, they were really big to suggest power and grandeur, very expensive, and usually they would be in the form of either a person or an animal or some combination. But even in ancient times people knew the statue was not the real god. In fact, after they constructed a statue, it would actually have to have kind of an inauguration ceremony before it went online, before it was activated. Where, by magical rights, its eyes would be opened; its mouth would be energized; it would be given life.

The idea around the statue was to manipulate spiritual power of that god to get what you want. We actually read about one of these kinds of inaugural ceremonies in the Old Testament. Moses is on Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments, and he's gone a long time. **"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'" (Exodus 32:1).**

Amazing, what made people choose to embrace an idol rather than the real God was that the real God was making them wait, and they didn't want to wait. Hurry and impatience will actually push people to idolatry because with an idol, it's real important that you're in charge. Well, Aaron takes their gold jewelry, makes a golden calf, and says, **"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord,"** and the idea is that was going to be ceremony, where the calf would get activated.

Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Anybody here remember, what was the first of the Ten Commandments? **"You shall have no other gods before me."** It was the prohibition of idolatry, and the people are already breaking the very first commandment. And Moses sees his brother, Aaron, is leading the parade, so he reads him the riot act. Look at what Aaron says: **"Do not be angry, my lord,' Aaron answered, 'You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. ' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!'" (Exodus 32:22-24).**

Before you give Aaron too hard of a time, remember that he's just demonstrating a trait common to all of us: We all want to avoid being thought of as idolaters.

Now, when we hear the word idolatry, most people think about bowing down to statues. Of course, that doesn't apply to us. But Israel came to understand that even someone who is not engaged in external idolatry may be involved in internal idolatry. This is the real problem...internal idolatry.

God says about the leaders of Israel, **"...these men have set up idols in their hearts"(Ezekiel 14:3).** The real problem isn't a statue in a temple; it's an idol in a heart. What is an idol? It's anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. An idol, or as Tim Keller calls them, a counterfeit god, is anything so central and essential to your life that, if you lose it, your life feels like it's not worth living.

An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought.

And a big part of the problem with idolatry is you can take something that's neutral or even good and turn it into an idol. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement, or social standing, or saving face. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, skill, comfort, beauty, brains. It can be a great social cause, your morality or virtue, or even success in Christian ministry. An idol is whatever you look at and say in your heart of hearts, "If I have that then I'll feel like my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." That is called worship.

The Apostle Paul saw that some people had made sex a god and said this about them, **"They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).**

One of the problems in our day is that we think we don't have an idol until our idol gets threatened. And this is a fundamental truth about idolatry: **Prosperity tends to mask our idols; crisis tends to reveal our idols.** As long as things are going well in my life, I don't think I have an idol problem until there's a crisis, and then all of a sudden I realize, *Man, I've been banking on this idol to do stuff that it can't do.*

After the global financial meltdown started in 2008 there was a string of suicides of formerly wealthy and well-connected people. The acting CFO of Freddie Mac hanged himself in his basement. The CEO of Shel don Good, a leading real estate auction firm, shot himself. A French money manager who lost \$1.4 billion in Bernie Madoff's schemes, slit his wrists. When our idols don't deliver, our lives seem to fall apart.

So I'm not asking *if* we have an idol problem. I'm not asking that because it's just a given. The real question is... *Which idol is God's biggest rival in my life? In your life?* Because we all got them.

So to start the series, I wanted us to get real clear in a real personal way on our idol problem, so we're going to take an IQ test, okay? Not an Intelligence Quotient test, an *idolatry* quotient test...what is your idolatry quotient? So look at your program and you'll see the number one through nine on the front. Let's take a minute and write down some potential idols. This may be a little uncomfortable but that's OK. It will help us.

So the first wannabe idol in our society is...

1. **Money**...just write down the word *money*. Does anybody have any questions about whether money can be an idol?
2. **Success**. That's an idol...wants to be one.
3. **Being smart**...being smart. For some of us, our degrees and education can become an idol.
4. **Attractiveness**...attractiveness. And we'll actually spend quite a lot of money, and sometimes go through physical pain for this one.
5. **Relationship**. A relationship can become a kind of an idol. If I put it in the wrong place in my life or if somebody does that with me, it's idolatry.
6. **Pleasure**. And it really is possible for a human life to be oriented around self-gratification. And if it goes even further, this idol can become an addiction. So many of the dynamics of addiction involve rituals and intense devotion, sacrifice; they will rule a life.
7. **Church**. Ironically, a church or maybe you're reputation for being spiritual or knowing the Bible or something, that can become an idol. It was a big problem in Jesus' day with religious leaders.
8. **Work**. Lots of people make this an idol.

And then I left a space, and if you think about something else...reputation or something else...then you fill that idol in that you think might be a problem for you.

And now, I'm going to ask some questions, and after each of these questions, put a little check mark next to that particular item. This is going to be diagnostic for each one of us now...about eight questions I'll ask you.

1. **Which of these do I find myself thinking about the most?** Look over those eight. Which one of those eight occupies your minds? Because our idols are what we tend to daydream about. Which one of those eight do you think about the most?

2. **Which of these do I most fear losing?** Or feel like life might not be worth living if I did not have this, if I lost that? 3. **Which of these most gives me a sense of identity?** Which one most makes me feel that because I got *this* or am *this*, I'm *somebody*? Which one of those most gives you a sense of identity?

4. **Which of these do I look to most to make me feel secure?** Which one are you most tempted to gain a sense of security from? Put a little check mark next to that one. 5. **Which of these do I most want to be known for?** Again, it could be success, or a relationship, or having money or something.

6. **Which one most causes my emotions to go up and down?** ...makes me happiest when I have lots of it, makes me saddest when it's threatened. Just put a check mark next to that. 7. **Which one of those would other people who know me well say is my most likely idol?** Because other people, they see that stuff in me. Well, just put a check mark to it. Which one would other people say is probably your idol?

8. **Which one do my efforts most tend to revolve around?** Because we give our behavior, our actions, toward our ultimate priority. Which one of these do I sacrifice the most for?

Now, hand your paper over to the person next to you, and we'll check them. No, you don't have to do that! But you might want to talk to somebody about your idol issues. Whichever item has the most check marks clustered around it, just take a look at that for a moment. That's my primary rival for God in my life. That's my idol.

In the face of all that, the one true God says, "Put me in the center of your life." The primary text of ancient Israel says this: , "**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength**" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

And Jesus, when he's asked what's the law about, starts at exactly the same place, "**Love the Lord your God...**" Why does God hate idolatry so much? Well, it's not because of what idolatry does to God. God hates it because of what it does to us because it train wreck's life. So let me wrap up with the cost of idolatry.

First, **it will cost you God's purpose for your life.** If I embrace God, then God sets the agenda for my life. God has a purpose for me. But the whole appeal of idolatry is an idol has no agenda for me. Idolatry is an attempt to manipulate spiritual power to get me what I want. When we turn our backs on God's agenda, we turn our backs on his purpose, and when we turn our backs on his purpose, nothing, and I mean nothing makes us feel whole. You see, an idol cannot tell me my purpose because an idol didn't make me, cannot hold me accountable, cannot bring justice to the world.

Another cost...**your idol will exhaust you.** Your idol will exhaust you. I tell you what I think the primary demand of most idols in our day is... *Thou shalt perform.* It's a pressure to have the perfect life, and home, and kids, and career, and body, and skin, and teeth, and balanced life. Performance will kill you. And our idols will take more and more and more and give you less and less and less until eventually they take everything and give you nothing.

Listen, no idol ever said, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" You know who said that? Take a shot; this is church. You got a real good chance. Jesus said that, and when Jesus said that he was talking to people that had an idol problem and didn't know it. And for a lot of them, their idol was religious performance. He said, "Come to me. Stop trying to perform for God." It'll kill you...whatever your god is. And it's killing people.

And that brings me to the last cost. **Idols do not have what you need the most: Grace.** Idols will cost what you need more than anything else: The grace that offers hope, and healing, and comfort, and forgiveness, and freedom, and lasting joy. Idolatry robs you of all that and more.

One of the most amazing speeches in history was from the Apostle Paul in the city of Athens where everybody would come from all over the world and bring their gods on a place called Mars Hill, named after one of the gods. There were all these statues and shrines...one god after another. And Paul goes to address the people, and he doesn't blast them. He says, "I see in every way you are very religious..." because we all are. We worship something. "As I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. What you worship as something as unknown, I am going to explain for there is one God, not a whole pantheon of little gods, and he is not made of silver or gold. He has created everything that is...made you and me...and he is unspeakably good. And when we foolishly gave our hearts to all these other gods, he would not give up on us. But he has revealed himself through a man, Jesus, and on the cross he died for our sins. And in his resurrection, he gave us hope."

And Jesus is still inviting people to give up their idols and follow him, and he's it. Jesus, alone, is worthy of my whole devotion. He, alone, has the authority to forgive all of my sins. He, alone, has the wisdom to guide my whole life. He, alone, has the power to defeat suffering and death. And alone can set us free. What a way to start a new year! And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Tim Keller for his book Counterfeit Gods, and Rev. John Ortberg for his teaching on this material.