

# The Downward Spiral of Idolatry

## The Loss of Meaning and the Problem of Idolatry—part 5

March 26, 2023

### DAY 1: The inevitable downward spiral of idolatry

1. Idolatry “promises” the moon but eventually leads to:

→disappointment, which leads to

→dissatisfaction, which leads to

→disillusionment, which leads to a

→craving for more, which ends in

→slavery or addiction.

2. Whatever or whomever we put in the place of God in our lives becomes our idol.

*Col. 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, **which is idolatry**.<sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.*

3. God’s wrath is meant to stop us in our tracks! It is similar to the parent disciplining their children for running in the street without looking or getting in a car with a stranger. The discipline may be painful, but it is merciful compared to the what the end result could have been!

*Ephesians 4:22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires...*

4. The bible tells us there are different kinds of desires which include godly desires, evil desires, and deceitful desires.

5. Deceitful desires are the quintessential “bait and switch.” They promise a level of fulfillment they can’t deliver.

6. Advertisers are experts in appealing to our deceitful desires. In order to get you to “bite,” deceitful desires and idols have to “sell themselves” to you. The sales involve a certain level of delusion and seduction. They inflame our imagination as to what the fulfillment, finances, relationships, or outcomes they promise to deliver.

8. The tactics of advertisers is how deceitful desires lull us away from God. Deceitful desires and idols prey on our idealizing what we are seeing. They pull on the heart, and kindle fires within us as to what we “must have” and “need.”

9. But reality always has the last word. Idols inevitably collapse and leave us with failure and shame, regret and the feeling of lost opportunity. They rob us of meaning in general, and meaning is specifics, like the loss of meaning in a marriage, a career, etc.

*John 8:34 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”*

10. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

## DAY 2: A different idol: a worldview or a cause

1. When people won't worship the true God, they are susceptible to worship anything. In the past weeks we've looked at examples of worshiping/idolizing a person(s), a thing(s), specific outcomes, or a feeling.

2. Today, we look at another kind of idol: the worship of a worldview or a cause.

3. This is easily seen in today's world. Here are some modern examples of making a worldview an idol: climate change, capitalism, socialism, democracy, communism, abortion rights, science, a form of religion, sexual rights, political control/power, winning elections, etc.

4. I am not here making an editorial statement about these examples. The point is that each of these can become a "god," and idol, and the highest purpose and source of meaning for a person.

5. The deeper observation is that people who make a cause their idol usually clump together several causes together into what we call a worldview.

6. A worldview is what a person believes about the world, God, the purpose of life, the meaning of life, what it means to be human, what morality is, etc.

7. For the upper crust Judaism, two thousand years ago, the religious leaders worshiped something Jesus called "human traditions."

*Mark 7:6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' <sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to **human traditions.**"*

8. The Jewish intellectuals had taken the hundreds of Old Testament laws and figured out a way to obey each and every one of them, down to the detail.

9. If you kept all the minutia of rules they taught, that satisfied the hunger for honor, position, authority, and congratulations, both from others and from patting yourself on the back.

10. Jesus said these men were driven by a thirst for glory.

*John 12:43 ...for they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God.*

11. The "game" is played exactly the same way today. People pick a cause or causes (which can be religious or irreligious), establish the "right" rules to live by, punish or cancel those who don't obey the rules and pat themselves on the back or give awards to each other at awards shows.

12. Do you personally resonate with a cause being an idol in your life?

13. What strikes you about today's devotional?

### DAY 3: Idolatry of the heart

1. People make idols out of anything or anyone. An idol can be a person, a group of people, a thing, a role in life, an outcome, a cause, or some aspect of life—like sex.

2. Idolatry has an object or person attached to it, but

a. Idolatry is born and lives in the heart, and

b. Slowly hardens our heart and turns it more and more lifeless.

*Ezekiel 3:7 But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are **hardened** and **obstinate**.*

*Ezekiel 14:3 “Son of man, these men have **set up idols in their hearts** and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?*

3. Are there idols you have set up “in your heart?” What things or people come to mind?

*Ezekiel 14:4 Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any of the Israelites set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling block before their faces and then go to a prophet, I the LORD will answer them myself in keeping with their great idolatry. <sup>5</sup>I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.’*

4. God goes to work against this massive problem in the human heart! Under each of the following sub-points, jot down what comes to your mind for each subpoint.

a. God says they have all “*deserted* me for their idols.”

b. His aim is to “recapture the hearts of the people.

c. God “will answer them myself.”

5. What strikes you about God’s heart for the people and His work for the people?

6. If someone you loved “deserted” you, would you still have this kind of heart for them?

7. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

## DAY 4: The downward spiral of idolatry in Romans 1

*Rom. 1:21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for **images** made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.*

1. Idol worship is the root sin of all sins.
2. At its heart, idolatry is an exchange of one thing for another. It is replacing the creator God with some aspect of His creation.
3. What two ways does Paul describe the God we exchange?
4. How does Paul describe what we exchange God for?
5. How does Paul characterize the thinking that goes on behind the exchange?
6. The downward spiral of idolatry takes a gargantuan toll on us.
  - a. Their thinking became “futile.” Our discernment about good and evil, right and wrong, our ability to make un-biased judgments about life is badly skewed. How we think about God and people is not trustworthy.
  - b. Their foolish hearts were darkened. Our affections and desires turn dark. We are more motivated by our own needs being met than by meeting the needs of others. Our desires and cravings overrule our rationality.
  - c. “They claimed to be wise but became fools.” We now assume that our “wisdom” is wise. Instead, we now think like fools do.
7. People are punished by means of their own sin. Punishment is meant to be a dynamic wake up call. We call it a “come to Jesus” moment, when we realize our idols are not only not working but in fact are leading us toward confusion, dysfunction, pride, broken relationships, depression, despair, misery, emptiness, loneliness, etc.
8. What strikes you from today’s devotions?

## DAY 5: The downward spiral into dysfunction

*Romans 1:24 Therefore **God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts** to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup> They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

1. When people insist on living for their sinful desires as highest priority, God doesn't force them to do otherwise.
2. What people don't know is that pursuing sinful desires as highest priority is a terrible idea.
3. The downward spiral descends with at an accelerated pace.

*<sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

4. Sexual dysfunction widens, but the fall is now going to be deep and wide.
5. Atheists may try to blame God for evil in the world, but one read of the following paragraph puts the problem of evil squarely in the idolatrous heart.

*Romans 1:28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*

6. When the heart turns away from ultimate trust in God to trust in some part of God's creation, then the heart becomes darkened, and all manner of sins follow from this.

7. The fitting consequence for dysfunction in worshipping God is a dysfunction in our personal lives and dysfunction in our relationships. This is a self-inflicted punishment. The self-inflicted consequences are in themselves God's punishment to attempt to alert them to their self-inflicted folly.

*Hosea 4:7 They changed their glory into shame...*

8. People become as corruptible as their corruptible idols.
9. Of course, none of this has to happen, but human beings are hell bent on turning away from God as God and exchanging Him for almost anything else—at their eventual peril.

10. What strikes you from today's devotional?

## EXTRA MATERIAL:

***2 Cor. 3:18 And we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.***

Garden of Eden: shifted their ultimate loyalty away from God to the serpent, whose deceitful character they came to represent, since they started lying immediately after their fall. They thought they acquired “knowledge” (tree: KNOWING good and evil) and thought they were on the path of wisdom (the tree was desirable to make one wise). GEN. 3:5-6.

Man forgot he was made in the image of God, and instead, sought to identify his image elsewhere, of his own making.

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...their foolish hearts darkened—a transformed condition of the heart that is now degraded.

Instead of reflecting Christ’s image—Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:10.

A malfunction in our relationship with God inevitably means malfunctions in our relationships with people.

### Romans CONTRAST:

Rom. 1—wrongful worship, dysfunction, foolishness, etc.

Rom. 12—Surrender to God, holy, approving the will of God, etc.

Rom. 1:18-28: Wrath, refusing to glorify God, dishonoring the body, misunderstood, idolatry, reprobate mind; rejecting the righteousness of God.

Rom. 12:1-2: Mercy, sacrificing to God, offering the body, service; renewed mind; approving the will of God.

2 Peter 1:4 “sharers of the divine nature” == a family likeness is to be reflected especially the divine characteristics of “godliness, knowledge, glory and virtue

2 Kings 17:14-15

People become identified with that which they fully devote themselves to: identity; defined by...; anchored.

“Identity is not a mere matter of external worship but of internal commitment by the heart. It is the presence of the spiritually empty idol in one’s heart that changes the being of the idolater into a spiritually empty creature.”

Solomon’s bad example: 1 Kings 11:1-2, 4

7 SETTING UP IDOLS IN HIS HEART. →The object of desire; the hope of security.

Trusting in Egypt's help – Isa. 29-30:5

Saul established his own basis of worship contrary to God's command. 1 Sam 15:22-23

Ex's of purpose of idolatry: establish your identity, basis of your importance, your "check-list of goodness", good enough behavior, that you matter.

Idolatry includes: deifying me (in the sense of making me the final arbiter of right and wrong, good and evil, and my standards of morality for me. It is to abrogate God's role from Him as God and exalt yourself to His place as moral authority.

We trust others, self, and outcomes

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*Phil. 3:18-19 ...enemies of the cross, whose god is their belly and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.*

li Hosea's wife.

*Hosea 3:1 Go yet, and love a woman that loves evil, and an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they give (heartfelt) attention to foreign gods.*

This preference for human glory instead of God's glory is an idolatrous concept

→Light and darkness contrasts:

John 12:35-36

John 12:46; 44-45, 50; Matt. 5:16;

WHAT YOU REVERE YOU RESEMBLE, EITHER FOR RUIN OR RESTORATION.

### **BECOMING LIKE WHAT WE WORSHIP: THE GOSPELS**

All humans are imaging beings and are made to be committed to God and to reflect him, and if they don't they will be committed to some part of the creation and reflect it.

In Jesus' day, the Jews did not bow down to statues, but that did not mean they didn't commit idolatry. Instead, they put their trust in something other than God. They were idol worshipers in essence, though the outward form was expressed differently.

Matt. 6:24 – No one can serve two masters.

Luke 16:13

Isaiah 6 – prophecy that after exile, the people would still be idol worshipers. Jesus quotes this passage in all four gospels for His present generation! The problem is spiritual blindness and deafness that then turns away from God in a functional sense and turns to something or someone else to find real life.

**Becoming like what we worship: Revelation**

In the book of Revelation, we learn that those who are idol worshipers, will not look to God for their security both in this life and the next life. They are determined to worship some aspect of creation—a person, thing, outcome, feeling, or cause in the hopes of meeting their needs and providing meaning.

The price they pay for their idolatry is an increasing hardened heart, eyes that refuse to see God's truth or ears that refuse to consider God's truth.

It is a jolting message.

Rev 13 ...the "ones dwelling upon the earth." = not of Xns, but unbelieving idol worshipers → they cannot look beyond this earth for their security, which means that they trust some part of the creation instead of the Creator for their ultimate welfare. CONTRAST: Xns are called "exiles in a foreign land," ---desire a better home, a heavenly one (Heb. 11:13-16)

Whatever is our prime commitment is what we actually worship.