

Modern Idolatry: Understanding and Overcoming the Attraction of Your Broken Cisterns

BY LOU GOING*

*“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the fount of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot contain water.”
(Jeremiah 2:13)*

Idolatry is a Problem for Everyone

Tammy, a pretty woman of 30, is married and has a child. Her husband loves her, yet she has two problems. First, she does not think that she is very attractive. She worries about her weight and is very insecure in relationships. Second, when she has had a rough day and is stressed out, she secretly binges on food, downing a whole box of cereal or a half-gallon of ice cream. For a moment she feels satisfied. Then her satisfaction turns to horror and fear. Afraid of gaining weight, she runs to the bathroom and forces herself to vomit. What would you say is at the root of Tammy’s problems? Just telling Tammy that she is wrong or that she is sinning will not help her. She knows that she is sinning. Instead, she needs help understanding the dynamics of her sin and the dynamics of Jesus’ redemption, so that she can really change.

Sin is recognized often (and accurately) as disobedience and rebellion. Yet, it is also idolatry of the heart. As such, sin is binding and blinding. It is also foolish and stupid.

Idolatry is first an issue of the heart. Idols are false gods to which we attach ourselves for desired favors. The phrase “idols of the heart” is found in Ezekiel 14:1–11, where the prophet describes the elders of the people as having idols in their hearts. Commentator C. F. Kiel remarks, “We have not to picture these elders to ourselves as given up to gross idolatry. ‘Idols in their hearts’ means to allow anything to come into the mind, to permit it to rise up in the heart, to be mentally busy therewith.”¹ Mike Bobick writes, “The nature of idolatry is heart-worship. Anything to which one is devoted in opposition to God can properly be called an idol.”²

Our idols become sinful allies in our opposition to God. In Hosea 4:17, the sin of Ephraim is described in connection with uniting with or being joined to idols. “Apparently these idols were Ephraim’s allies against the one true God. Idols are confederates in one’s rebellion against the creator.”³ Our idols help us obtain what we want over against what God desires for us.

The Dynamics of Idol Worship

Tammy is sinning, not just by disobeying God with her vanity and her lack of self-control, but by wanting two things more than she wants His grace. First, she wants attractiveness so others will notice her. This works powerfully in her heart, robbing her of the joy of delighting in Christ, who is inherently more attractive in His glory and grace. Second, she wants comfort when she is stressed, so much so that she will commit gluttony rather than find satisfaction in the bread that Jesus offers to the hungry soul. She doesn’t eat because she is hungry; she eats for the sensation and comfort the food brings.

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¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. 10 vols. (Repr. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 178.

² Michael W. Bobick, *From Slavery to Sonship: A Biblical Psychology For Pastoral Counseling* (Westminster Discount Book Service: Scarsdale, NY, 1989), p. 38.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Tammy's sin and sinful habits or patterns are really expressions of false worship or idolatry. In a sense the dynamics of false worship are the same as the true worship we are to offer to the living God. We develop bonds with our idols (we all have plenty of them) through the dynamics of worship. We worship what we value. Or as Jesus taught, our hearts are where our treasure is. What we treasure, we worship. Worship entails our whole being. We give ourselves to the object we worship. Worship is a dynamic and living response to what we value or treasure. This happens in four connected ways:

- 1. We worship with our minds.** We place value on a certain object. We make a value judgment, an assessment of an issue, person, or object. We judge that it is valuable. To put it another way, we assess that this situation or object will bring a blessing into our lives. In the case of the worship of God, the judgment is true. In the case of idols, the judgment is based on a lie. The intellectual dynamic of worship, therefore, is an assessment or an evaluation. We perceive the object as valuable for certain reasons. In Tammy's case, she valued two things: an attractive appearance and comfort from physical gratification when she was stressed.
- 2. We worship by our desires.** We have an affectionate attachment to the object we want. We long for it, delight in it, desire it, must have it, and fear losing it. We keep thinking about it. This level of involvement really drives the worship. We find a certain object desirable for what it can do for us. Tammy did not simply make a judgment that being pretty was valuable; she desired to be pretty. It was something that she deeply wanted and for which she even desperately longed. She was terrified of losing her youthfulness. Likewise, when she was upset and hurting inside from the

pressures of life, she desired comfort. At those moments comfort became the treasured craving.

- 3. We worship by our wills.** Tammy made choices and gave herself to the pursuit of achieving an attractive appearance. She became very loyal to her two gods, giving them full allegiance. When the god of attractiveness said, "You must lose weight," she did. Yet she tried to cheat this god. When she was upset, the other god of physical relief offered her the blessing of comfort if she devoured some food in bulk. She believed this god's promise and found the comfort, but not for long. The other god was angry and required a sacrifice of atonement. Tammy complied by going into the bathroom and forcing herself to vomit. Tammy's idols are competing gods, which powerfully bind her in a no-win situation.
- 4. We worship by our words.** We praise what we worship. When our idols work for us, we praise them. When they don't, as in Tammy's case, we do not praise them. Nevertheless, we continue to be slaves to their required worship and obedience.

Marty further exemplifies how this worship dynamic works. He was distraught and depressed, finding life no longer worth living because his girlfriend had dumped him. He is a professing Christian, while his girlfriend is not. They had been living together for about a year. He knew that it was wrong, but he refused to give it up. Now she has moved out and he is devastated. When confronted about the fact that he, as a Christian, had no business living with her, and that unless she is a believer he has no basis on which to marry her, he shrugs his shoulders and says he knows and is sorry now.

Yet, he has been depressed about this for

a month. He has not eaten or slept well. She is all he can think or talk about: the great times they had together and what they had in common. He still longs for her and can only proclaim how good she was for him. He just doesn't understand why she left him. He sings her praises while feeling devastated by her treatment of him. Even though she may no longer be with him, he continues to worship her.

The Lie of the Idol

Idols are served and worshiped in view of what they can give us. We want what they offer or promise to give us. In Jeremiah 9:23–24, God tells Israel not to boast about wisdom, strength, or riches. “Boast” suggests an activity of worship. In this text of Jeremiah, wisdom, strength, and riches can be seen as more desirable to Israel than knowing God. “To glory in” is another way of describing worship. First, it hints at a response to an object that is viewed as possessing supreme value. Whether the object is supremely valuable or not doesn't matter; the worshiper perceives it as such. The worshiper delights deeply in the object and makes a personal commitment of allegiance to it.

Another way of putting it is that wisdom, strength, and riches are desirable because of what they do for us. If we have them, then we are smart or strong or resourceful. They become attributes that make us think we are self-sufficient. In our hearts, we long to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and in control. We also strongly desire to be safe and secure, and attractive to others. To put it very bluntly, we want to be God! God is inherently all these attributes and more. But we can only turn to certain objects, persons, situations, or opportunities, believing that if we are committed to them or give ourselves to them, they will give us the wisdom, strength, and riches that we can think we need.

For example, we may pursue certain

career paths, believing that if we give ourselves to the requirements of the job, in due time we will grow in skill (wisdom) and be recognized by others as skillful and knowledgeable. We will then be promoted (power, strength) and have more control. The more we climb up in position, the more money we will make (riches). Hard work or giving an honest day's work at our jobs is not the problem here. The problem is that we can turn our jobs into idols to which we give ourselves, in order to receive their blessings (wisdom, power, and riches). If this is the case, then we glory in what the job offers us.

Dan and Susan are a case in point. Susan married Dan with the desire that they build a life together. She hoped that marriage would make her happy, and for awhile it did. But after about three years, it became starkly obvious to Susan that Dan's first love was his job. Dan's extreme attachment to his job converted his job into an idol for him. Susan's extreme attachment to the ideal of a certain kind of marriage converted marriage into an idol for her. Dan was looking to his job to give his life meaning. Susan was looking to marriage to give her life meaning. Susan complained to Dan constantly about how he was spending too much time at work. Dan justified this by saying he was doing it for her and the kids, that it was his way of loving his family. Susan did not buy his excuse.

The Levels of False Worship

We are by nature worshipers. We worship with our mind, our desires, our will, and our words. These dynamics work simultaneously and apply to false worship as well as to the worship that the living God calls us to give to Him. Let's consider three levels of false worship.

- 1. We seek desired blessings from the object of worship.** Not only do we desire wisdom, strength, and riches, but we could add to this list pleasures, a good

reputation, gratification, and being loved by another. It is whatever the idol can give us, or the pleasure, power, recognition, or success that we believe will benefit us.

2. Our worship focuses on an idol-object.

The object is the means to the blessing. In Dan's case, he wanted success, a good reputation, and money. The job was the means to these desired goods. Susan wanted to be loved and to realize security. Her marriage to Dan was the means to these longings. Idol-objects can be any number of things, including those things that are in themselves good: health, house, hobby, spouse, children, and vocation. They can also encompass things that are evil or illicit: drugs, an adulterous affair, fornication, or a shady business deal.

3. We seek to promote self by our idolatrous worship.

We want to secure our own kingdom, independence, and way. Hence, we are self-seeking, self-trusting, and self-reliant. We want to be valued, praised, and even envied by others. We commit ourselves to the object (number 2 above) for its promised benefit (number 1 above). Yet, we ourselves—the idol-makers—are the actual idols. Self-worship is really what fuels our idolatry. We create idols in our own image. One of the proofs that this is true is our reaction to a perceived threat against our idols. If we think that the blessing will not come to us from the idol, we become angry, depressed, bitter, and filled with self-pity. Marty's depression was the result of his idol-object leaving him. Dan's anger toward Susan was due to the fact that he saw her complaints as spoiling his success and accomplishment from work.

In false worship, we want to possess

wisdom so we might be seen as wise; strength, so we might be considered strong, in control, dominant, and in charge; and riches, because we think they will make us self-sufficient and self-reliant. By means of our false worship, we live for our own pleasures.

Idols are Leaking Cisterns

In Jeremiah 2:13, the Lord rebukes the Israelites for two sins. First, the Israelites forsook the Lord who is the fountain of living water and they dug their own cisterns, which were broken and could not contain water. Then the Israelites kept returning to those broken and leaking cisterns. Our idols also might work for us for a long time. For some people, it seems that their idols have a very slow leak. Yet, even when an idol has become empty, it maintains a pull and power over a person's life. Take the junkie whose veins are collapsing because of the heroin. He may not receive the high he once did, but the pull of the idol remains.

Our idols may seem to work for us for a time, but sooner or later they will start to curse us and hold us in sinful bondage. The Lord chastises His people for their pursuit of idols and reminds them of how ineffectual the idols really are.

In Dan's case, he resented Susan's complaining. It spoiled for him the pleasure he got from his job. Yet, other issues also made it harder for him to enjoy his job. There was conflict with other workers and his boss was criticizing him, so his job was becoming no longer a good thing. It was leaking.

Susan's disappointment and disenchantment with her husband also were growing every day. The relationship they had in their early years was gone. In fact, as she reflected on their marriage, it became clear to her that she was the one who really wanted a relationship and she was the one who had done all the giving. Yet, Susan had done all the giving *in order to get*. She had given in

order to get the kind of marriage she wanted and for which she had dreamed. The marriage cistern was now leaking and she was becoming disillusioned and angry.

Bob was excited about finally taking the helm of a church. Granted it was a small church, but he had spent four years in Bible college and was eager to put into practice what he had studied. He wanted to serve God and to see people's lives changed. What enthusiasm he brought to the ministry! The first two years went okay. People praised his preaching and kept coming back for more. He did a lot of visiting and people liked it. Yet, whenever he began to speak of vision, change, and reaching into the community, it seemed that nothing happened. Into the third year, Bob started to develop health problems. He continued fighting colds and seemed to be always on edge. He even woke up one night with chest pains, thinking he was having a heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital. There was no heart problem; the doctors attributed it to anxiety and stress.

He found that his preaching began to take on a certain sharpness, and that he was angry when he preached. One day he just could not take it anymore. He began to weep uncontrollably in his study and felt that God and the church had let him down.

The Solution is Found in True Worship

The only solution for Tammy, Marty, Dan and Susan, and Bob is to begin to truly worship God through the power of the gospel. They must return to the Fount of Living Water and freely drink! Genuine worship is true delight in God. God is the goal. A relationship with Him is what we value, as He alone is valuable and worthy. True worship is our delight in God as God. We know this by faith.

1. By faith we see (understand) that God is valuable. He is the blessing our minds value.
2. By faith we long for him and we delight

in Him. He is the great object of our worship that our desires pursue.

3. By faith we give our allegiance to Him. We become God-centered. Our allegiance is no longer with ourselves but with Him. His will becomes our will.
4. By faith, we openly need Him, love Him, and seek Him. Our words sincerely praise Him.

Bob did get help. He discovered that he had turned the ministry into his idol. He had an inordinate desire for a successful ministry and was in bondage to success. After much counseling and repentance, he rediscovered the grace of God in Christ and was renewed. Ministry was now an opportunity for him just to be faithful. Its ups and downs did not upset him as much. Now when he finds himself becoming upset, he stops and reminds himself where the good news is found. God accepts him in Christ; he is a son of God and is not alone. God will help him. All God calls him to do is to be faithful. Bob now serves his people, rather than uses them.

Dan and Susan got help, too, and repented of their respective idolatry. Susan came to see that her only encouragement was found in Christ (Phil. 2:1ff.) Dan could never make her happy. In fact, the only way she legitimately could view Dan was in terms of how she could minister to him and thus honor God. She came to terms with her idolatry and began to believe the gospel. Her encouragement was found in her faith-union with Christ. As she learned to meditate on Christ's love for her, she found real and lasting comfort. She was not alone. No matter how many hours Dan stayed at work, Susan believed in the partnership she had with the Holy Spirit. She was freed from Dan, her idol-object, and could now love and minister to Dan, her husband.

Dan too was convicted of his sin. He had looked to success in the business world to give him contentment. In so doing, he had

neglected his wife. He confessed that he did love his job more than he loved Susan. Yet, his job was something he was using to get other perceived treasures: success, reputation, and money. He was broken over his sin not only against Susan but also against God. He began to see that only Christ could give him true contentment of heart. To raise his job above Jesus was offensive to his Lord. As his treasure began to change, he took specific steps away from his idol. He cut back on his work hours. He got involved in a men's accountability Bible study at church. He began to apply the commands of Philippians chapter two to his relationship with Susan.

Keeping Your Heart

The gospel is God's offer of amnesty to idolatrous traitors and of restoration to Himself, the only true and living God. The condition is our surrender to Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. We enter into this relationship as forgiven people, with a new record of perfect and permanent righteousness, and as sons and daughters. This is the righteousness of Christ imputed or credited to us.

Bob, Susan, and Dan quickly learned that though they were free from their idols, the idols were not far away, and there were always new ones ready to take hold in their hearts. They learned that repentance is continually necessary for God's children because we still believe the lie that the broken cisterns are valuable. We still harbor lusts for their favors. Temptation is always an allurements to false worship, and sin is always an act of false worship, because every transgression entails the three levels of worship discussed above.

Repentance Has to Occur on All Three Levels of Idolatry

Repentance means that I must have a change of mind about what is really valuable.

1. I must turn from seeking the blessings of

the idol (wisdom, strength, riches, etc.). I no longer agree that such things are valuable. I must hear and receive heavy doses of the truth, coupled with sincere prayer for grace to see the vanity in the allurements and enticements of the idols. There is pleasure (even a security of sorts) in sin for a season. I value by faith my growing understanding and knowledge of the true God. "Let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord" (Jer. 9:24).

Tammy made modest gains from Christ-centered counseling, but the pull of both her idols remained basically unbroken. While she was tired and hurt from the vise-like grip of her competing gods, in her heart she still carried their promised favors of quick satisfaction and physical attractiveness. As long as these longings ruled in her heart, she could not receive the help that only Jesus can give. Jesus does not offer her physical beauty or cheap comfort, but instead He offers her Himself. Having Jesus on His terms and desiring Him had to become more valuable to her and more desirable than being attractive, thin, or good-looking. Drinking from the fountain of living water had to become more satisfying to her than sucking the mud from the leaking cistern of bingeing. For real change to occur, Tammy needed to repent on this level of her false worship.

2. I turn from the object itself. The rich man forsakes his riches. The prodigal forsakes the pigs. Paul forsakes his life as an honored Pharisee. Marty came with a pack of old love letters from his former girlfriend. He was offered a waste can and a book of matches and was encouraged to burn the letters to take a specific step in manifest repentance. Sadly, he could not bring himself to do this. He would not do it, because he still held the object dear, and the object held him in bondage.

3. I turn from self: from self-control, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. I repent of demanding my way and of brooding over not having my way (James 4:1–10). I repent of my desire to promote myself. I remember that my idols are allies in my fleshly opposition to the Living God. They promise me the “goods” I desire to support my self-rule. Resisting them is what dying to self, crucifying the flesh, or conforming to Christ’s death is all about.

Marty wanted to be free of depression. “What am I to do,” he asked, “to be happy again?” When given the same answer, that he repent and believe on Christ and His grace, he said he did not know how. When told that repentance means that he must have a change of mind about the value and significance that this girl had in his life and that he must give her up and flee to Christ, he again says he does not know how. When asked if he believed that when he died he would have a place in God’s kingdom, he said he is sure because he is a believer and he accepted Christ as his Savior at a camp meeting when he was a teenager. Yet, when it was pointed out that he does not treasure God’s grace offered to him in Christ, but in fact treasures this girl above Christ, Marty did not understand. “Isn’t faith simply believing that Christ died for your sins?” he asked. When Marty was told that faith is not only trusting in Christ but also treasuring Christ, he was bothered and felt very uncomfortable. He admitted that if the girl were to come walking back into his life, he would be happy.

Sin goes much deeper than just attitudes (anger, disappointment, lust, self-pity) and behavior (ignoring one’s spouse, fornication, gluttony, preaching angry sermons). It is true that attitudes and behaviors must change and reflect godliness. Yet, such attitudes arise from a heart that wants to remain in control and be independent (which amounts to pride) and that looks to things in this life (job,

ministry, marriage, attractive appearance) to make life meaningful and happy (which is unbelief or misplaced belief). The attachment that our proud and unbelieving hearts have to the things of this life (some good and some evil) is basically idolatrous. We worship, treasure, and trust in that which is not the triune, living God. Ultimately, what we want and that which we worship have to change. From the heart flow such evil attitudes and behaviors. Our hearts are hardened, darkened, and deceived, and they also possess (and are possessed by) idols.

Sometimes what our idols are is very clear to us. At other times we are only sensitive to the presence of sinful affections or passions, or we have a state of mind and actions that are marked by anxiety, worry, anger, bitterness, depression, or fear. We may not be clear on the cause, but more than likely it is a sinful and idolatrous view of life that needs to change. We need to identify and locate our idols. Another way of understanding the connecting link between sin and idols is to read carefully Paul’s words in Romans 6. Paul shows how sin always leads to our being dominated. It takes many forms (rebellion, disobeying God, falling short), but it is also seen in terms of idolatrous bondages that we have had a part in forming. The good news is that through Christ we can repent and no longer worship our idols.

One last thought: God loves idolaters! He sent his Son to die for idolaters. Jesus receives idolaters. So what must idolaters do? Trust in Jesus. We need do nothing else but flee to Jesus Christ. Perhaps someone will say, “I did this but my idol is back and I am worshiping at its shrine. How can I go to Jesus again?” Repentance is really the same thing as faith; faith is always repentant. All we need do is repent. It is not a work or a prerequisite for coming to Jesus. It is how we must come. Repentant faith and faith-filled repentance continue to be necessary for us. Our idols will seek our worship again and

again. So we must flee to Jesus again and again. How can we break the power of idolatry and sin? By going to the cross of Jesus Christ and nowhere else. He was killed for what we deserve as idolaters. Change occurs only when we come to and believe on Jesus. Then the attraction and pleasurable offers of our idols are unmasked for what they really are. Jesus removes the lie and opens our eyes to see what treasure is inherently valuable. Lives of growing obedience, purpose, and love are built on this foundation. “By faith Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ to be of greater riches than all the treasure of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Heb. 11:24–26). When we trust in Jesus, our eyes are open to the lies of our idols and we can stay close to the One who alone is the rightful object of all our worship, glory, and praise.

Matthew 13:44–46
Philippians 3:7–10
Jeremiah 9:23; 17:1–14
2 Corinthians 8:9; 9:8–15

Idol-Detecting Questions

These questions are geared to help you detect where your idols might be.

What do I not have in my life that, if I only had, I believe would make me happy?

What do I now have, that, if taken away, would leave me unhappy or devastated?

What do I have now that I spend a lot of time maintaining and would struggle to keep?

What is it that I now have in my life that I can't live without?

Idol-Destroying Truth and Love

These passages are geared to clear your mind and heart, and to bring you to the Lord of life.

Who is the alternative?

Psalm 73:21–28