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Counterfeit Gods

THE SUMMARY

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Chapter 1: All You've Ever Wanted

Most people spend their lives trying to make their heart's fondest dreams come true. Isn't life all about "the pursuit of happiness"? We search endlessly for ways to acquire the things we desire, and we are willing to sacrifice much to achieve them. We never imagine that getting our heart's deepest desires might be the worst thing that could ever happen to us.

Why is getting your heart's deepest desire so often a disaster? In the book of Romans, Saint Paul wrote that one of the worst things God can do to someone is to "give them over to the desires of their hearts" (Romans 1:24). Why would the greatest punishment imaginable be to allow someone to achieve their fondest dream? It is because our hearts fashion these desires into idols. In the same chapter, Paul summarizes the history of the human race in one sentence: "They worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). Every human being must live for something. Something must capture our imagination, our heart's most fundamental allegiance and hope. But the Bible tells us that, without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, it will never be God himself. If we look to something that has been created to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver, and it will break our hearts instead.

There is always something that we invest in to reach a level of joy and fulfillment that only God can give. The most painful times in our lives are when our idols are threatened or removed. When that happens we can respond in two ways. We can choose bitterness and despair. We can feel entitled to wallow in those feelings, saying,

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

"I've worked all my life to get to this place in my career, and now it's all gone!" or "I've slaved my whole life to give that girl a good life, and this is how she repays me!" We may feel at liberty to lie, cheat, take revenge, or throw away our principles in order to obtain some relief. Or we may simply live in permanent despondency.

Or, like Abraham when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac, we can take a walk into the mountains. We can say, "I see that you may be calling me to live my life without something I never thought I could live without. But if I have you, I have the only wealth, health, love, honor, and security I really need, so I cannot lose." As many have learned and later taught, you don't realize Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.

Many, if not most, counterfeit gods can remain in our lives once we have demoted them below God. Then they won't control us and bedevil us with anxiety, pride, anger, and ambition. Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of thinking that this story means all we have to do is be willing to part with our idols rather than actually leave them behind. If Abraham had gone up the mountain thinking, "All I'll have to do is put Isaac on the altar, not really give him up," he would have failed the test. Something is safe for us to maintain in our lives only if it stops being an idol. That can happen only when we are truly willing to live without it, when we truly say from the heart, "Because I have God, I can live without you."

Sometimes God seems to be killing us when he's actually saving us. He was turning Abraham into a great man, but on the outside it looked like God was being cruel. To follow God in such circumstances seems to some to be blind faith, but it is actually vigorous, grateful faith. The Bible is filled with stories of figures such as Joseph, Moses, and David in which God seems to have abandoned them, but later it is revealed that he was dealing with the destructive idols in their lives, and that could only come to pass through difficulty.

Like Abraham, Jesus struggled mightily with God's call. In the garden of Gethsemane he asked the Father if there was any other way, but in the end, he obediently walked up Mount Calvary to the Cross. We can't know all the reasons our Father allows bad things to happen to us but, like Jesus, we can trust him in those difficult times. As we look at him and rejoice in what he did for us, we will have the joy and hope necessary—and the freedom from counterfeit gods—to follow the call of God when times seem darkest and most difficult.

Chapter 2: Love Is Not All You Need

Romantic love is an object of enormous power for the human heart and imagination, and it can dominate our lives. Even people who completely avoid romantic love out of bitterness or fear are controlled by its power. I once knew a man who said he had been so disappointed by women that he now engaged only in no-commitment sexual encounters. No longer would he be manipulated by love, he boasted. In response I argued that if you are so afraid of love that you cannot have it, you are just as enslaved as one who must have it. The person who can't have it will avoid people who would be wonderful partners. The person who must have it will choose unfit partners. If you are too afraid of love or too enamored by it, it assumes godlike power, distorting your perceptions and your life.

There are many ways that romantic love can function as a drug to help us escape the reality of our lives. Sally, a beautiful woman who was trapped in abusive relationships once told me, "Men were my alcohol. Only if I was on a man's arm could I face life and feel good about myself." Another example is the older man who abandons his spouse for a far

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

younger woman in a desperate effort to hide the reality that he is aging. Then there is the young man who finds a woman desirable only until she sleeps with him a couple of times, after which he loses interest in her. For him, women are simply a necessary commodity to help him feel desirable and powerful. Our fears and inner barrenness make love a narcotic, a way to medicate ourselves, and addicts always make foolish, destructive choices.

If you get married, putting the weight of all your deepest hopes and longings on the person you are marrying, you are going to crush your spouse with your expectations. It will distort your life and your spouse's life in a hundred ways. No person, not even the best, can give your soul all it needs. This cosmic disappointment and disillusionment are there in all of life, but we feel their impact the most on the things we value the most.

When you finally realize this, there are four things you can do. First, you can blame the things that disappoint you and try to move on to better ones. That's the way of continued idolatry and spiritual addiction. Second, you can blame yourself, beat yourself, and say, "I have somehow been a failure. I see everybody else is happy. I don't know why I'm not happy. There is something wrong with me." That's the way of self-loathing and shame. Third, you can blame the world. You can say, "Curses on the entire opposite sex," in which case you make yourself cynical and empty. Fourth, you can, as C. S. Lewis says at the end of his great chapter on hope, reorient the entire focus of your life toward God. Lewis concludes, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world [something supernatural and eternal]."

Many people have not found a romantic partner, and they need to hear the Lord say, "I am the true Bridegroom. There is only one set of arms that will give you all your heart's desire and await you at the end of time, if only you turn to me and know that I love you now." However, it is not just those without spouses who need to see that God is our ultimate spouse, but those with spouses as well. They need this in order to save their marriage from the crushing weight of their divine expectations. If you marry someone and expect that person to be like a god, it is inevitable that you will be disappointed. It's not that you should try to love your spouse less, but rather that you should know and love God more.

One day Sally told me how she got her life back. She went to a counselor who rightly pointed out that she had been looking to men for her identity, for her "salvation." The counselor proposed that, instead, she should find a career and become financially independent as a way of building her self-esteem. The woman agreed wholeheartedly that she needed to stand on her own two feet economically, but she resisted the advice about finding self-esteem. "I was being advised to give up a common female idolatry and take on a common male idolatry," she said. "But I didn't want to have my self-worth dependent on career success any more than on men. I wanted to be free."

How did she do it? She came across Colossians 3 where Saint Paul writes, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God . . . and when Christ who is your life appears, you will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1–4). She came to realize that neither men nor career nor anything else should be "her life" or her identity. What mattered was not what men thought of her or how much career success she enjoyed, but what Christ had done for her and how he loved her. So when she saw that a man was interested in her, she would silently say to him in her heart, "You may turn out to be a great guy, and maybe even my husband, but you cannot ever be my life. Only Christ is my life." When she began to do this, she got her life back. That spiritual discipline gave her the ability to set boundaries, make good choices and, eventually, to love a man for himself, not simply to bolster her self-image.

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

She had answered the question that we all must address in order to live our lives the way we should: Who can I turn to who is so beautiful that he will enable me to escape all counterfeit gods? There is only one answer to this question. As the poet George Herbert wrote while looking at Jesus on the Cross, “Thou art my loveliness, my life, my light, Beauty alone to me.”

Chapter 3: Money Changes Everything

Innumerable writers and thinkers have pointed out “the culture of greed” that eats away at our souls and brings about economic collapse. Yet no one thinks that change is around the corner. Why? It’s because greed is especially hard to see in ourselves.

Why can’t someone in the grip of greed see it? The counterfeit god of money uses powerful sociological and psychological dynamics. Everyone tends to live in a particular socioeconomic bracket. Once you are able to afford to live in a particular neighborhood, send your children to good schools, and participate in social life, you find yourself surrounded by people who have more money than you. You don’t compare yourself to the rest of the world; you compare yourself to those in your bracket. The human heart always wants to justify itself, and this is one of the easiest ways. You say, “I don’t live as well as they do. My means are modest compared to theirs.” You can think like that no matter how lavishly you are living. As a result, most Americans think of themselves as middle class, and only 2 percent call themselves “upper class.” But the rest of the world is not fooled. When people visit here from other parts of the globe, they are staggered to see the level of materialistic comfort that the majority of Americans have come to view as a necessity.

Jesus warns people far more often about greed than about sex, yet almost no one thinks they are guilty of being greedy. Therefore, we should all begin with a working hypothesis that “this could easily be a problem for me.” If greed hides itself so deeply, no one should be confident that it is not a problem for them. How can we recognize and become free from the blinding power of money? Money is one of the most common counterfeit gods there is. It takes hold of your heart and blinds you to what is happening, it controls you through your anxieties and lusts, and it entices you to put it ahead of all other things.

To understand how greed works, we should consider that counterfeit gods come in clusters, making the idolatry structure of the heart complex. There are “deep idols” within the heart beneath the more concrete and visible “surface idols” that we serve.

Sin in our hearts affects our basic motivational drives so they become idolatrous, “deep idols.” Some people are strongly motivated by a desire for influence and power while others are more excited by approval and appreciation. Some want emotional and physical comfort more than anything, while still others want security, control of their environment. People with the deep idol of power do not mind being unpopular in order to gain influence. People who are most motivated by approval are the opposite; they will gladly lose power and control as long as everyone thinks well of them. Each deep idol—power, approval, comfort, or control—generates a different set of fears and a different set of hopes. “Surface idols” are things through which our deep idols seek fulfillment such as money, our spouse, and our children.

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

The person using money to serve a deep idol of control will often feel superior to people using money to attain power or social approval. In every case, however, money-idolatry enslaves and distorts lives. Another pastor at my church once counseled a married couple who had severe conflicts over how they handled money. The wife considered the husband a miser. One day the pastor was speaking one-on-one to the husband, who was complaining bitterly about what a spendthrift his spouse was. "She is so selfish, spending so much on clothes and appearance!" He saw clearly how her need to look attractive to others influenced her use of money. The pastor then introduced him to the concept of surface and deep idols. "Do you see that by not spending or giving away anything, by socking away every penny, you are being just as selfish? You are 'spending' absolutely everything on your need to feel secure, protected, and in control." Fortunately for the counselor, the man was shocked rather than angered. "I'd never thought of it like that," he said, and things began to change in the marriage.

This is why idols cannot be dealt with by simply eliminating surface idols such as money or sex. We can look at them and say, "I need to de-emphasize this in my life; I must not let this drive me. I will stop it." Direct appeals like that won't work because the deep idols have to be dealt with at the heart level. There is only one way to change at the heart level, and that is through faith in the gospel.

The solution to stinginess is a reorientation to the generosity of Christ in the gospel, how he poured out his wealth for you. Now you don't have to worry about money—the Cross proves God's care for you and gives you security. You don't have to envy anyone else's money. Jesus' love and salvation confer on you a remarkable status, one that money cannot give you. Money cannot save you from tragedy or give you control in a chaotic world. Only God can do that. What breaks the power of money over us is not just a redoubled effort to follow the example of Christ. Rather, it is deepening our understanding of the salvation of Christ, what we have in him, and then living out the changes that understanding brings to our heart, the seat of our mind, will, and emotions. Faith in the gospel restructures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without a complete change of heart will be superficial and fleeting.

Chapter 4: The Seductions of Success

More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are gods, that our security and value rest in our own wisdom, strength, and performance. To be the very best at what you do, to be at the top of the heap means no one is like you. You are supreme.

One sign that you have made success an idol is the false sense of security it brings. The poor and the marginalized expect suffering; they know that life on this earth is "nasty, brutish, and short." Successful people are much more shocked and overwhelmed by troubles. As a pastor I've often heard people from the upper echelons say, "Life isn't supposed to be this way" when they face tragedy. I have never heard such language in my years as a pastor among the working class and the poor. The false sense of security comes from deifying our achievements and expecting them to keep us safe from the troubles of life in a way that only God can.

Another sign that you have made achievement an idol is that it distorts your view of yourself. When your achievements serve as the basis for your very worth as a person, they can lead to an inflated view of your abilities. If your success is

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

more than just success to you—if it is the measure of your value and worth—then accomplishment in one limited area of life will make you believe you have expertise in all areas. This, of course, leads to all kinds of bad choices. This distorted view of ourselves is part of the blindness to reality that the Bible says always accompanies idolatry (Psalm 135:15–18; Ezekiel 36:22–36).

Our contemporary culture makes us particularly vulnerable to turning success into a counterfeit god. In his book *The Homeless Mind*, Peter Berger points out that in traditional cultures, personal worth is measured in terms of “honor.” Honor is given to those who fulfill their assigned role in the community whether as citizen, father, mother, teacher, or ruler. Modern society, however, is individualistic and bases worth on “dignity.” Dignity means “the right of all individuals to develop their own identities free from any socially assigned role or category.” Modern society, then, puts great pressure on individuals to prove their worth through personal achievement. It is not enough to be a good citizen or family member. You must win, be on top, to show you are one of the best.

The idol of success cannot simply be expelled; it must be replaced. The human heart’s desire for a particular valuable object may be conquered, but its need to have some such object is unconquerable. How can we break our hearts’ fixation on doing “some great thing” in order to rid ourselves of a sense of inadequacy and give our lives meaning? Only when we see what Jesus, our great Suffering Servant, has done for us will we finally understand why God’s salvation does not require us to do “some great thing.” We don’t have to do it because Jesus already has. That’s why we can “just wash.” Jesus did it all for us, and he loves us. That is how we know our existence is justified. When we believe in our minds what he accomplished for us, and when we are moved in our hearts by what he did for us, the addiction, the need for success at all cost, starts to disappear.

All during Jesus’ ministry his disciples asked him, “When are you going to take power? When are you going to stop fraternizing with simple people? When are you going to start networking and raising money? When will you run for office? When’s the first primary? When’s our first TV special?” Instead, Jesus served humbly before being tortured and killed. When Jesus rose from the dead he appeared first to women who, in those days, had no status. Jesus’ salvation is received not through strength but through the admission of weakness and need. And Jesus’ salvation was achieved not through strength but through surrender, service, sacrifice, and death. This is one of the great messages of the Bible: God chooses the weak of the world to shame the strong, the foolish and despised to shame the wise, the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are (1 Corinthians 1:29–31). That’s how God does it.

Chapter 5: The Power and the Glory

One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, “What a shame; how difficult,” but rather “This is the end! There’s no hope!”

This may be why so many people now respond to U.S. political trends in such extreme ways. When either party wins an election, a certain percentage of the losing side talks openly about leaving the country. They become agitated and fearful. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once were reserved for God and the work of the gospel. When their political leaders are out of power, they experience a death. They believe that if their policies and

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

people are not in power, everything will fall apart. They refuse to admit how much agreement they actually have with the other party and, instead, focus on points of disagreement. The points of contention overshadow everything, and a poisonous environment is created.

Dutch-Canadian philosopher Al Wolters taught that in the biblical view, the main problem in life is sin, and the only solution is God and his grace. The alternative to this view is to identify something other than sin as the main problem with the world and something besides God as the main remedy. That demonizes something that is not completely bad and makes an idol out of something that cannot be the ultimate good.

This accounts for the constant political cycles of overblown hopes and disillusionment, increasingly poisonous political discourse, and disproportionate fear and despair when our political party loses power. But why do we deify and demonize political causes and ideas? Reinhold Niebuhr answered that, in political idolatry, we make a god out of having power. We also can make our political philosophy into a saving faith. This happens when politics becomes “ideological.”

Ideology can be used to refer to any coherent set of ideas about a subject, but it can also have a negative connotation closer to its cousin word, idolatry. An ideology, like an idol, is a limited, partial account of reality that is raised to the level of the final word on things. Ideologues believe their party has the real and complete answer to society’s problems. Above all, ideologues hide their dependence on God from their adherents.

In any culture in which God is largely absent, sex, money, and politics will fill the vacuum for different people. This is why our political discourse is increasingly ideological and polarized. Many describe current poisonous public discourse as a lack of bipartisanship, but the roots go much deeper than that. As Niebuhr taught, they go back to the beginning of the world, to our alienation from God, and to our frantic efforts to compensate for our feelings of cosmic nakedness and powerlessness. The only way to deal with all these things is to heal our relationship with God.

One of the great ironies of sin is that when human beings try to become more than human beings, to be as gods, they fall to become lower than human beings. Being your own God and living for your own glory and power lead to the most bestial and cruel kind of behavior. Pride makes you a predator, not a person.

Our hearts say, “I will ascend; I will be as the Most High for my own sake,” but Jesus said, “I will descend; I will go low for their sakes.” He became human and went to the Cross to die for our sins (Philippians 2:4–10). To save us, Jesus lost all power and served. He died, but that led to redemption and resurrection. So if, like Jesus, you fall into great weakness, say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46), and there will be growth, a change, and a resurrection.

Jesus’ example and grace heal our desire for power. The normal response to our sense of powerlessness is to deny it, to find people to dominate and control in order to live in that denial. But Jesus shows us another way. By giving up his power and serving, he became the most influential man who ever lived. Jesus is not only an example, however, he is a Savior. Only by admitting our sin, need, and powerlessness and by casting ourselves on his mercy will we finally become secure in his love and, therefore, empowered in a way that does not lead us to oppress others. The insecurity is gone; the lust for power is cut at the root. As a preacher once said, “The way up is to go down; the way down is to go up.”

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

Chapter 6: The Hidden Idols in Our Lives

So far we have looked at personal idols such as romantic love, financial prosperity, and political success. These counterfeit gods are not so difficult to spot. There are others, however, that influence us but are more hidden. They are not the idols of our heart but of our culture and society.

We should not think that one culture is less idolatrous than the next. Traditional societies tend to make the family unit and the clan into an absolute, ultimate thing. This can lead to honor killings, the treatment of women as chattel, and violence toward gay people. Western, secular cultures make an idol of individual freedom, and this leads to the breakdown of the family, rampant materialism, careerism, and the idolization of romantic love, physical beauty, and profit.

An idol is something that we look to for things that only God can give. Idolatry functions widely inside religious communities when doctrinal truth is elevated to the position of a false god. This occurs when people rely on the rightness of their doctrine for their standing with God rather than on God himself and his grace. It is a subtle but deadly mistake. The sign that you have slipped into this form of self-justification is that you become what the book of Proverbs calls a “scoffer.” Scoffers always show contempt and disdain for opponents rather than graciousness. This is a sign that they do not see themselves as sinners saved by grace. Instead, their trust in the rightness of their views makes them feel superior.

Another form of idolatry within religious communities turns spiritual gifts and ministry success into a counterfeit god. Spiritual gifts (talent, ability, performance, growth) are often mistaken for what the Bible calls spiritual “fruit” (love, joy, patience, humility, courage, gentleness). Even ministers who believe with the mind that “I am only saved by grace” can come to feel in their hearts that their standing with God depends largely on how many lives they are changing.

Another kind of religious idolatry has to do with moral living itself. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the default mode of the human heart is to seek to control God and others through our moral performance. Because we have lived virtuous lives we feel that God (and the people we meet) owes us respect and support. Though we may give lip service to Jesus as our example and inspiration, we are still looking to ourselves and our own moral striving for salvation.

We do not have only idols of the heart to confront. Corporate gods of the culture and religion can supercharge personal idols and create a poisonous mix. A poor young man who feels powerless can easily be swept up by social movements that fan racial and religious hatred. A young woman unloved by her family, raised in a consumer culture of image and glamour, can become afflicted with an eating disorder. The idols that drive us are complex, multilayered, and largely hidden from us.

Idolatry distorts our feelings. Idols are good things turned into ultimate things. Likewise, the desires they generate become paralyzing and overwhelming. Idols generate false beliefs such as, “If I cannot achieve X, then my life won’t be valid,” or “Since I have lost or failed Y, now I can never be happy or forgiven again.” These beliefs magnify ordinary disappointments and failures into life-shattering experiences.

There is legitimate guilt that is removed through repentance and restitution, and then there is irremediable guilt. When people say, “I know God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself,” they mean they have failed an idol whose approval is more

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

important to them than God's. Idols function like gods in our lives, and if we make career success or parental approval our god and fail it, then the idol curses us in our hearts for the rest of our lives. We can't shake the sense of failure.

When idolatry is mapped onto the future—when our idols are threatened—it leads to paralyzing fear and anxiety. When it is mapped onto the past—when we fail our idols—it leads to irremediable guilt. When idolatry is mapped onto the present life—when our idols are blocked or removed by circumstances—it roils us with anger and despair.

When I struggle with my idols I think of Jesus voluntarily bowing his head into that ultimate storm for me. He sank in that storm of terror so I would not fear any storm in my life. If he did that for me, then I know my value, confidence, and mission all rest in him. Storms here on earth can take away many things, even my physical life, but not my eternal life.

Chapter 7: The End of Counterfeit Gods

The human heart is, indeed, a factory that mass produces idols. Is there any hope? Yes, if we begin to realize that idols cannot simply be removed; they must be replaced. If you only uproot them they grow back, but they can be supplanted, but by what? By God himself, of course. But by referencing God, we do not mean a general belief in his existence. Most people have that, yet their souls are riddled with idols. What we need is a living encounter with God.

The reader of the life of Jacob might be perplexed. In no episode throughout the life of Jacob does he ever emerge as the hero. He never behaved as a moral paragon; instead he continually acted in foolish, devious, or even vicious ways. He didn't seem to deserve any blessing from God at all. Why, if God is holy and just, was he so gracious to Jacob? Why would God feign weakness to keep from killing him, give him clues as to who he was, then bless him for no better reason than that he held on desperately?

The answer to our question comes later in the Bible when the Lord again appears as a man. In the darkness with Jacob, God feigned weakness in order to save Jacob's life. But in the darkness of Calvary, the Lord appeared as a man and became truly weak to save us. Jacob held on in obedience at the risk of his life, in order to gain blessing for himself. But when facing the Cross, though he could have turned aside, Jesus held on in obedience—at the cost of his life—to gain the blessing, not for himself, but for us.

Why could Jacob come so close to God and still live? It was because Jesus came in weakness and died on the Cross to pay the penalty for our sin. The blessing promised to Abraham "comes . . . through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." What was that "promise of the Spirit"? Later in Galatians, Paul writes, "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts who cries out 'Abba, Father'" (Galatians 4:6). Abba was the Aramaic diminutive word for "father," roughly translated "papa." It is a term of trusting confidence that a little child has in a parent's love. Paul is saying that, if you believe the gospel, the Spirit will make God's love and blessing an existential reality in your heart.

Have you heard God's blessing in your innermost being? Are the words "You are my beloved child in whom I delight" an endless source of joy and strength? Have you sensed, through the Holy Spirit, God speaking them to you? That blessing—the blessing through the Spirit that is ours through Christ—is what Jacob received, and it is the only remedy for idolatry. Only that blessing makes idols unnecessary. As with Jacob, we usually discover this only after a life of "looking for blessing

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

in all the wrong places.” It often takes an experience of crippling weakness for us to finally discover it. That is why so many of the most God-blessed people limp as they dance for joy.

Epilogue: Finding and Replacing Your Idols

I am not asking whether you have rival gods. I assume that we all do; they are hidden in every one of us. The question is: What do we do about them? How can we become increasingly clear sighted rather than remaining in their power? How can we be freed from our idols so we can make wise choices that are best for us and those around us? How can we discern our idols?

One way requires that we look at our imaginations. Archbishop William Temple once said, “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” In other words, the true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material goods such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? One or two daydreams don’t indicate idolatry. Ask, rather, what do you habitually think about to find joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?

Another way to discern your heart’s true love is to look at how you spend your money. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also” (Matthew 6:21). Your money flows most effortlessly toward your heart’s greatest love. 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.

A third way to discern idols works best for those who have professed a faith in God. You may regularly go to a place of worship. You may have a full, devout set of doctrinal beliefs. You may be trying very hard to believe and obey God. However, what is your real, daily, functional salvation? What are you really living for? What is your real—not your professed—god? A good way to discern this is how you respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes. If you ask for something that you don’t get, you may become sad and disappointed. Then you go on. Hey, life’s not over. Those are not your functional masters. But when you pray and work for something and don’t get it, and you respond with explosive anger or deep despair, then you may have found your real god.

A final test works for everyone. Look at your most uncontrollable emotions. Just as a fisherman looking for fish knows to go where the water is roiling, look for your idols at the bottom of your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong.

Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God; it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God. This cannot be remedied only by repenting that you have an idol or using willpower to try to live differently. Turning from idols is not less than those two things, but it is also far more. “Setting the mind and heart on things above” where “your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:1-3) means appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you. It entails joyful worship, a sense of God’s reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to plant the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

Rejoicing and repentance must go together. Repentance without rejoicing will lead to despair. Rejoicing without repentance is shallow and will only provide passing inspiration instead of deep change. Rejoicing in Christ is also crucial because idols are almost always good things. If we have made idols out of work and family, we do not want to stop loving our work and our family. Rather, we want to love Christ so much more that we are not enslaved by our attachments.

“Rejoicing” in the Bible is much deeper than simply being happy about something. Paul directed that we should “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4), but this cannot mean to “always feel happy” because no one can command someone to always have a particular emotion. To rejoice is to treasure a thing, to assess its value to you, to reflect on its beauty and importance until your heart rests in it and tastes the sweetness of it. “Rejoicing” is a way of praising God until the heart is sweetened and rested, and until it relaxes its grip on anything else it thinks it needs.

I believe that this process will take our entire lives. We think we’ve learned about grace, set our idols aside, and reached a place where we’re serving God not for what we’re going to get from him but for who he is. There’s a certain sense in which we spend our entire lives thinking we’ve reached the bottom of our hearts only to find it is a false bottom. Mature Christians are not people who have completely hit the bedrock. I do not believe that it is possible in this life. Rather, they are people who know how to keep drilling and are getting closer and closer.

The great pastor and hymn-writer John Newton once wrote about this struggle: “If I may speak my own experience, I find that to keep my eye simply on Christ, as my peace and my life, is by far the hardest part of my calling . . . It seems easier to deny self in a thousand instances of outward conduct than in its ceaseless endeavors to act as a principle of righteousness and power.”

The man or woman who knows the difference that Newton refers to—the difference between obeying rules of outward conduct rather than setting your heart on Christ as your peace and your life—is on the road to freedom from the counterfeit gods that control us.

The Pastor’s Perspective

Keller’s book *Counterfeit Gods* takes a deeper look at idolatry than I have ever done. I found it insightful and challenging. I would have said that I had a good understanding of the topic, but Keller goes to a whole different level. I found it hard to choose only one or two things to comment on. But I will anyway.

One thing that really stood out was one of the results of having an idol in your life: “One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life.” When anything less than God is at the center, we intuitively know that it can be lost or taken, that it is fundamentally insecure. That causes fear. If you aren’t sure if you have an idol in your life, look for the fruit—fear being a big deal. That’s a great tip-off.

I never thought of looking at the fears in my life as ways to identify idols, but it didn’t take long to see how that could be true. Maybe my fear of failure is connected to some kind of idolizing of success or of performance being the basis for my identity. That begins to strike close to home.

LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

Counterfeit Gods

I was also struck by another diagnostic tool. “The true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention.” I thought that was brilliant. What do I think about without trying; where do my thoughts naturally go when there are no demands on my brain and no to-do list in front of me?

Do I think about how I would spend the money if I won the Lottery? Or what it would be like if I was the greatest basketball player ever? Of if I had a ministry that was changing the world? Where do we go in our unscripted, unguarded moments? I wish I could say I always thought about seeing Jesus face to face, but that wouldn’t be true.

Finally, looking at what is underneath our most volatile and painful emotions. What gets us stirred up at the deepest levels? And how does that affect the choices we make?

Keller says we all have idols and potential idols lurking in our lives. Reading *Counterfeit Gods* actually exposed some of mine to me. What about you? Were there things that stood out to you? Click [here](#) to post your thoughts and add your insights.