

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 37 – Idols of the Heart

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Have you ever encountered people who use phrases such as “God is speaking” or “the Holy Spirit led me?” Typically, we hear things and put them into our existing framework of understanding and will assume that they mean that God spoke to them through the Bible or that the Holy Spirit led them providentially through circumstances. If we challenge words and phrases, people will find us annoying and so we just accept what is said.

In recent times, the phrase “idols of the heart” has been used in an attempt to describe certain root causes for sinful patterns of life or even to describe perceived unwise life decisions. Since “idols” are bad and since we recognize that New Testament Christianity includes an obedience that is from the heart (Romans 6:17; Ephesians 6:6), we can embrace this phrase at face value.

This class will examine the meaning and use of this phrase in light of what the Bible says we are able to know about our heart and about the heart of our fellow believers in Christ.

The meaning of idols in the Bible

An idol in the Bible is primarily a created likeness or image that represents a false god (Acts 7:41; 1 Corinthians 12:2; Revelation 9:20). Idols are normally described as having an actual physical form and are the work of men’s hands (Psalm 135:15-18). Some places, like Athens, were “full of idols” (Acts 17:16), which speak of the material rather than idols as a metaphor as replacing God. The second of the Ten Commandments specifically notes that an idol is something that is made (Exodus 20:4). When idols are spoken of in both the Old and New Testament, the overwhelming usage is meaning an actual physical image of some sort.

Correspondingly, idolatry is the religious worship of idols and therefore is typically connected to the worship of physical representations of false gods in the Bible.

However, there is a sense in which idolatry is referencing an internal adoration or devotion to something intangible, such as a sinful attitude. Colossians 3:5 notes that greed “amounts to idolatry.” The underlying notion found in the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

So idolatry is not restricted to physical idols. Literally anything can become an idol through adoration and devotion that is reserved for God alone, even the Bible itself.

The meaning of heart in the Bible

The use of the word “heart” in the New Testament is metaphorical for the immaterial part of man, the sphere of God’s influence. It is the seat of our moral being and spiritual life. The heart is where our doing of God’s will comes from (Ephesians 6:6). God evaluates the heart (1 Samuel 16:7) and demands complete devotion from our heart “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matthew 22:37).

Therefore, any shortcoming in complete devotion to God with all our heart is truly a step toward idolatry, or being devoted to something other than God alone.

The contemporary meaning of the phrase “idols of the heart”

Heath Lambert, the current president of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors writes, “[David] Powlison’s theme of heart idolatry has earned a broad following in the biblical counseling movement. The notion of heart idolatry is one that addresses motivation and seeks to answer concretely the question “why” and explain the because of behavior by explaining the wrongly placed desires in the worship of things that are not God.” Lambert sees this approach as an important and useful development in the work of biblical counseling.

Author Paul Tripp defines an idol of the heart broadly as “anything that rules me other than God.” The importance of rooting out idols of the heart is explained, “until the idol is removed, it will distort and obscure everything else in the person’s life.” So then comes the mission to uncover and then remove the idols of the heart so that person can see their life clearly.

The biblical use of the phrase “idols of the heart”

While there is no specific use of the phrase “idols of the heart,” Ezekiel 14:1-8 speaks of “idols in their hearts” or “idols in his heart.” However, Ezekiel 14 is speaking of actual physical idols and the heartfelt desire of men for them. It does not speak of idolatry in the metaphorical sense of something taking the place of God in a person’s life. Ezekiel 14 is basically used as a proof-text to support the phrase “idols of the heart” which does not mean what the phrase is presently said to mean in biblical counseling circles. It is simply an accusation of loving their idols.

How idolatry is addressed in the Bible

God’s people are frequently rebuked for idolatry. Their idols are mocked (Jeremiah 10:5; Habakkuk 2:18-19), derided as futile (Isaiah 44:9-10), and helpless (Psalm 115:4-8). However, it is interesting that when Paul speaks to the idolaters at Lystra (Acts 14:15-18) and Athens (Acts 17:16-34), he presents a much more reasoned approach without the ridicule. The Gentiles are lost in idolatry and need deliverance.

When we discuss the sins of the heart, we realize our audience. Unbelievers are ensnared, slaves to sin (Romans 6:17-18) and freed by faith in Christ. It is the people of God who are warned to guard themselves from idols (1 John 5:21).

The challenges of discerning the idols of the heart

All moral choices arise from the motives of our heart (Mark 7:18-23). This recognition is a critical juncture to avoid the pitfall of focusing on temporal, external behavioral change. At issue is how conclusive we can be at understanding these motives and how necessary this understanding really is.

1. Our hearts are deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9)

If Jeremiah 17:9 is correct and that “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?” then we have serious doubt about our human ability to evaluate our heart. The obvious response to this rhetorical question is “no one can understand it.” Proverbs 28:26 tells us that “he who trusts in his own heart is a fool.”

The evaluations of mankind regarding our own heart are suspect. These evaluations are so suspect that even Paul the apostle refrained from considering himself vindicated, “for I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:4).

It is certainly evident that we have an ability to evaluate our own internal attitudes and motives since a large part of the New Testament is written about these things. Without the ability to recognize these sins of the heart, much of the Bible would be irrelevant. The Holy Spirit’s ministry includes the conviction of our sin (John 16:8). But we can become deluded by only hearing and not doing (James 1:22), wrongly thinking we are living according to the will of God. Because this temptation plagues us, we can never declare our motives as pure, for it is the Lord who judges the heart.

2. Our knowledge is limited

Wayne Mack, Professor of Biblical Counseling at The Master’s College, has written, “if we attempt to interpret people’s problems before we gather adequate data we will only add to their difficulty rather than relieve it.” No doubt this is true. But left in the balance is the source of our data. The primary source, if not often the exclusive source, of data about a person’s problems in counseling situations is usually from the person themselves. Too often the reliability of the information is simply assumed, since we are each the expert on our own lives and in particular, our own hearts.

There is no doubt that we can learn to identify when a person we are speaking with has deluded themselves, and gaining information from other sources would be very helpful in knowing a person’s problem. But, unlike the Bible, which is fully adequate to provide us with all the information we need to live the Christian life (2 Timothy 3:17; 2 Peter 1:3), people do not have full knowledge even about themselves. We must recognize that our ability to be definitive in regard to the motivations underlying the behaviors of those we minister to is limited. 1 Kings 8:39 puts it as simply as “You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men.”

3. Our understanding is difficult

Not only are we limited in our ability to know the heart of another, we have difficulty in understanding the information that we may be able to gain. As we receive information, we must determine the accuracy and meaningfulness of this information. This is no small thing since the data can be misrepresented, intentionally or unintentionally, and if we leap to receiving it as factual, it then contributes to the forming of our understanding.

Furthermore as we mature, we recognize the significance of beliefs, attitudes, words and actions. This maturing process underscores our deficiency. Classes may be held to attempt to expedite our ability but this is challenging to grasp apart from real life experience. Even worse, classes may give the impression that a person is able to understand once a curriculum has been passed, overlooking this role of time as well as the unique giftedness of people for this task.

In other words, it is one thing to recognize that understanding the significance of information, as it relates to the life issues of others, is difficult, it is much worse to think we have abilities that we may not have. The effort to certify people based upon curriculum passed will lead to advancing some who may cause more harm than good and overlooking mature believers with a lifetime of wisdom and ministry experience.

4. Our tendency is toward legalism

Jesus said to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:11), which is teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (Matthew 15:10). This threat is forever with us as men elevate their own opinions to the level of God's word. This problem becomes more serious as the authority of the teacher increases. For example, people meeting for counseling can be particularly susceptible to a legalistic judgment upon the choices of another. Those in authority can have undue influence over others and can view the life choices of another as a manifestation of excessive devotion. When such a person is given the leverage of determining what idols a fellow believer's heart is attached to, the possibility of unrighteous judgment escalates.

We can be very challenged with the temptation to be legalistic when we discuss motives with people. Not only can the conscience of people differ about what is appropriate, we can also differ regarding what is excessive. By its very nature, an idol of our heart is an excessive devotion to something other than God. When we see the choices of others through our own value system, we can conclude excessive devotion exists and be moved to address it. This endeavor is ripe for legalistic judgment in areas of moral freedom.

5. The criteria is subjective

When we attempted to speak to the issues of the heart we quickly discover that these are subjective in nature. Even when our subject is expressly biblical, such as greed, envy, lust, fear, anger, etc., there is the obvious outstanding question of how much. What needs to happen before we conclude a person is greedy?

It gets far more problematic when we see certain actions that are not specifically identified as sin in the Bible as a necessary manifestation of internal motivations. The choices that people make can be lined up to draw an unfair conclusion about what a supposed idol of the heart is. The use of these biblical words can advance a decidedly unbiblical practice of making us unrighteous judges.

What spending practices constitute greed? What concerns are significant enough to describe as the fear of man? How much involvement in a recreational activity is too much so that it becomes our idol? How much comfort is sought before our motive is to please ourselves? There is no answer to these questions; only God knows these things.

6. The sin is not an idol but idolatry

Idols are nothing (1 Corinthians 10:19ff.). Idols are only a problem when we view them as significant, leading to the sin of idolatry. If we have placed excessive devotion to something other than the Lord Himself and created an idol in our heart, the identification and removal of the idol does not guarantee any actual change in our spiritual lives. The reason for this is because idolaters are rarely, if ever, attached to only one idol. The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The men of Athens had objects of worship.

When an idol is removed, an unrepentant idolater will move to other idols because of their lack of faith in God. There is no remedy for idolatry outside of complete faith in the true God. Therefore, the removal of an idol is only significant in response to our faith. Therefore the crux of the matter for mankind is not what the idol is, or even the sin of idolatry, but truly whether we believe in Jesus Christ. The followers of Christ will not be followers of idols.

7. The goal is unnecessary

The most ironic aspect of the pursuit of identifying so called “idols of the heart” is that this apparent quest to get to the more significant motives of the heart is wholly unnecessary. The reason identifying the heart motives is unnecessary is because there is a motive underlying the motive. What is the motive for greed? What is the motive for fear? What is the motive for lust? What is the motive for anger? It is the same motive that is beneath any possible idol, physical or metaphorical. That most fundamental motive is self. All sin is rooted in the desire to serve our self instead of serving the Lord.

In other words, even when we can manage to correctly isolate an “idol of the heart” that has captured our devotion in place of God, that idol itself is merely symptomatic. In our quest to get to the “heart-level” we stop short of getting to the root of all sin.

For example, even with what Colossians 3:5 says amounts to idolatry, namely greed, is not the most basic motivation. While you cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24), there are various motivations regarding why a person might be greedy. Such as a belief that they need more money in order to be secure, or a desire for more money to spend it on their pleasures, or to grow in status of having a larger accumulation of wealth. And each of these desires is rooted in one common place that ties all sin together: our self.

This explains why the Scripture does not call us to discover our idols, but rather to yield ourselves completely to the Lord. This is so large a theme that it is repeated and restated in many ways. For example:

- Being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)
- Losing our life for Christ’s sake (Matthew 16:25)
- Being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20)
- Not living for ourselves but for Christ (2 Corinthians 4:15)
- Sacrificing ourselves completely (Romans 12:1)

So, in contrast to this pursuit of discerning the idol of the heart, we would be best served denying our self for Christ’s sake (Matthew 16:25).

Objections

1. Isn’t it appropriate to ask questions?

Of course it is appropriate to ask questions. The problem is leading questions, meaning questions that presupposed a desired response. Questions must be designed to serve, not bring unrighteous judgment, and are one of many tools of communication that can be used for good or evil.

2. Doesn’t the elder and deacon qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 include evaluations of the internal motives of others?

First, the character qualities for church leaders are necessarily subjective because all churches need leaders. What one church may accept as a morally qualified leader, another church may not. These character qualities do not prove that the evaluations are accurate, just that they must be done in order for a church to function. In other words, someone needs to lead.

Secondly, these character qualities are specifically biblical. The things being evaluated are issues of biblical morality, not personal preference.

Finally and most importantly, these character qualities all have definite external manifestations that make them identifiable. They are not unknowable and found only in the heart but rather in the actions.

3. Didn't Jesus reveal the motives of the heart, such as with the rich, young ruler (Luke 18:18-30) and with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-30)?

Obviously, Jesus had the ability to know information about people that we are not able to know. Ironically, this objection actually shows that you have to be Jesus in order to speak authoritatively about the heart motives of others. We are not Jesus and cannot do all the things that Jesus could do.

However, this does not mean that we are unable to get to the same place with people through God's revelation. Notice that the main point in each case is to believe and follow Jesus (Luke 18:22; John 4:26). This was Christ's call and is the same call that we proclaim today.

4. Doesn't Hebrews 4:12 say that the Scripture will expose a person's heart to us?

Hebrews 4:12 has become the leading proof-text to claim that as we know the Bible, we are then able to know the thoughts and intentions of the hearts of people. But what does this verse actually say?

As Dale Whitehead has taught regarding this passage, the next verse, Hebrews 4:13, shows that it is God that is viewing the deep recesses of our heart and that nothing is hidden from Him. The Word of God says a lot about our thoughts and intentions of our heart and the Holy Spirit is seeking to illuminate our mind through our understanding of God's word to accurately view ourselves as God views us. Hebrews 4:12 says nothing about our ability to do this for anyone else. Indeed, this verse does not even promise that we will have knowledge of the intentions of our own heart but only when we do come to know them then the Scripture gives us the ability to judge those motives justly.

5. Don't we care about the heart instead of just the actions? Doesn't this result in external behavior modification?

The idols-of-the-heart approach to counseling is presented as the remedy for a focus on mere external conformity. It is Pharisaical to look only for external conformity and this charge has long been levied against those who believe the Bible is God's sufficient revelation for true change. Without a changed, repentant heart, there is no real change.

Nevertheless, at issue is not whether the heart should be addressed but rather how the heart should be addressed. There is a better approach to true, lasting change than guessing at the idols that a person may worship within their heart.

A better approach

Christ came to earth to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). It is His initiative that draws man to Himself (John 6:44). Upon yielding our lives to Christ through faith, the Holy Spirit fills our heart with the ability to walk in righteousness, as befits a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). All believers have the power of the Holy Spirit to walk in righteousness and this power can be thwarted when we grieve the Holy Spirit.

As followers of Christ, there are two aspects to spiritual growth: yielding ourselves to the Lord (Romans 12:1) and being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). This full commitment of ourselves to the Lord is being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and deals with the heart in a moment-by-moment fashion. The transformation by the renewing of our minds occurs through a growth in understanding over the course of time.

But what of the idols of our heart? What about those things that could attract our devotion to such an extent as to enslave us in false worship? Romans 6:1-14 speaks to the approach that we should have toward anything that crowds out our adoration for the Lord:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶ knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be ^ldone away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷ for he who has died is freed from sin.

⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹ knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. ¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. ¹¹ Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, ¹³ and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. ¹⁴ For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

So the approach that Romans 6:1-14 offers to overcome the idols of our heart is found in the words of Hebrews 12:2, “fixing our eyes on Jesus.” It has nothing to do with identifying our idols because even if we were able to do so, the remedy would be the same: know that our old self was crucified with Him, consider yourselves to be dead to sin and present yourselves to God.

There is no question that from the heart comes all sorts of evil (Matthew 15:18-19) but the means of dealing with the evil of the heart is through yielding ourselves wholly and completely to the Lord. The knowledge of, commitment to and pursuit of Jesus Christ will deliver us from evil and anything other than this will only find us returning to the same idolatry, albeit in perhaps a different form.