

April 22, 2007
 O.T. Godliness 101 (#3) - Rejecting Greed and Idolatry
 Colossians 3:5-11 / Job 31:24-28

As I considered the title of this series of messages — Old Testament Godliness 101 — I realized that title may be a little bit inappropriate. Because its really not Old Testament godliness at all...it's biblical godliness! There is NOT ONE PART of the righteousness spoken of in this chapter that does not carry over into the New Testament concept of godliness, virtue or righteousness.

Now, having clarified that, let me summarize what we've seen so far:

In verses 1-12 Job began with the virtues of Sexual Fidelity, went on to Truthfulness, and then ended with a Determined, Holy Resolve not to let his heart be led by his eyes, or his heart be enticed by another woman, actually calling down a curse upon himself if he should do any of them.

Then last week, from verses 13-23, we looked at three more aspects of biblical godliness – Being Just, or Doing Justice, being Generous, and carrying out our Social Responsibility as God's people to the poor and underprivileged.

And today in verses 24-28 we come to two more aspects of biblical godliness — the rejection of greed and the rejection of idolatry. Or, we could put it all under one heading, as Paul does in Colossians 3:5, and say "the rejection of greed which IS idolatry."

Because although Job focuses on his gold, wealth or the fortune he once had in verses 24-25, the gist of the passage is about what he puts his trust in (v.24) / what sustains his soul (or as he puts it) what he gets his sense of security in life from (v. 24b) / what brings him joy or makes him happy (v. 25) / or what his heart is secretly enticed to worship (v. 27b) — a kiss of homage (in the liturgical sense referenced here) is an act of worship whereby one "throws a kiss at something."

Thus, although greed, or the accumulation of wealth, or acquiring a fortune seems to be the issue at hand, it's really NOT. Because the issue behind the issue is simply idolatry in general — anything people look to, or trust in (other than God and His Christ) for their inner sense of security, strength, joy, or fulfillment.

You see, Christians in general have tended to think of idols (or I should say have limited their perception of idols) to statues, figures or images made of wood, stone or metal. (The same has been true of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus.)

And it is true, that if people place their spiritual trust in those things, or look to those things for their inner strength, happiness or fulfillment — if they pray to them or worship them (instead of merely having them on the shelf as a decoration), then they do fall into the category of being an idol (and we do need to distinguish between the two).

(In fact, it reminds me of when we were living in Westport, MA and David was about 4-5 years old. We had just gone over the second of the 10 commandments, where it does tell the people of God not to make "for themselves" (a key part of the verse!) any idols. And David, taking it to heart, came home one day from a friend's house only to inform me that they had a statue of Buddha on one of their bookcases.

And with a desire to do what he felt was right (in light of what the Bible said) he looked at me and said: "Should I smash it dad?" 😊 — at which point we had a little discussion on the difference between souvenirs that show where people have been, and idols that people worship!

Even the difference between non-believers having idols, and God's people making them for themselves, remembering that the 10 commandments, were decrees given to the people God has redeemed and chosen to be His own – the people He has entered into covenant relationship with and not so much everyone everywhere, indiscriminately.)

In the case of our passage from Job the sun and the moon are also set forth as idols — objects of sustaining trust or worship that secretly entice the heart and cause a person to offer them a kiss of homage.

But that's Job's point — idolatry is not limited to statues! Gold or wealth is also an idol, like the sun and the moon — if one trusts in them, looks to them for security or happiness, or worships them.

Now most of you here are saying: "Then in that case I'm safe! Because I would never worship money! I would never bow down to wealth or hold money in my hand and give it a kiss of homage! Nor would I ever do so to the sun or the moon."

Yet that's not necessarily true. Because what this passage teaches us is that we can worship money without ever going through the "liturgical motions" of bowing down before it or kissing it.

In fact, most people who worship it don't realize they're worshipping it, or don't realize they have it as an idol, precisely because they often forget what the ultimate litmus test of true worship really is — the worth, the value or the importance we place on something in our hearts.

Remember what I said when we were going through our sermon series on "Worship"? That our English word "worship" is derived from the Saxon word – "Worth - ship" — meaning that we worship whatever it is that we attribute the most value to, the most worth, the most importance, or the most significance.

Whether we actually bow down to it or kiss it (in our hearts or with our bodies) makes very little difference at all. For if we endow ANYTHING — either consciously or unconsciously with great or supreme value, we are "worth-shipping" it, and have thereby elevated it to the status of an idol.

Which means what? Which means that ANYTHING can be an idol. In fact, Paul tells us in Romans 1:25 that idolatry simply consists of "worshipping or serving or valuing created things rather than (or more than) the Creator." It is desiring, craving or yearning for things God has made more than we desire God

It is valuing, treasuring and having our hearts set upon things God has made more than God. It is spending more time, effort and energy in the service of, or seeking to attain things God has made than we do serving or pursuing the things of God.

Howard Hendricks once shared a good litmus test for what our idols are — he said, "Let me see your calendar and your check book." All you have to do is keep track of what you spend the majority of your FREE time dwelling on or doing, and most of your NON-DESIGNATED income on, and you'll have a pretty good idea of what potential idols you may have in your heart or in your life.

Or, look at the "created things" that you have an EXCESSIVE desire for — an EXCESSIVE craving for — the things that consume your heart and your affections — look for the things you feel you need to be happy, and without which you feel you could never be happy, and you'll have a good idea what your potential idols are.

Look to the things your thoughts go to whenever you're freed from responsibilities / the things that consume your waking thoughts / control your emotions / or dictate your spending. / The things that you constantly worry about / or that keep you awake at night. The things that make you feel glorious when you achieve it, or horrible when you don't — think of the things you must have and without which you would be unhappy, depressed, irritable, bitter toward God or others, angry, anxious or fearful inside.

Think of the things OTHER THAN GOD, which if you lost (or felt you might lose) — would devastate you / cause you intolerable stress / anxiety / fear / insecurity / or cause you to think about turning from God.

Consider those things — the things that may have popped into your mind as I was just talking, and it may help you pinpoint what some of your idols may be.

And please, don't do what most Christians do and limit it to bad or intrinsically evil things. Because most of the "idols" we have (and all of us have some — Calvin was right, the human heart IS an idol factory!) most of them are good things exalted to an inappropriately high position in our hearts or lives.

That's why we as Christians so often fail to even see them — because when we think "idol" we're thinking something bad, and looking for something bad, when in reality they're often good and necessary things elevated to a place in our hearts that they should never be.

That's why they can tend to slip under the radar (so to speak) of our introspective gaze, and go unnoticed. Or we can look right at them and think, "Oh, it couldn't be that, that's a good, virtuous, necessary thing."

But that's precisely why good things have the greatest tendency to become idols! Because we're taught to value them — like hard work, or the pursuit of knowledge, or striving for excellence, or family, or whatever it may be.

And because we are taught to value them, it's easy to miss the fact that we over-value them — value them to an excessive and unhealthy degree — an idolatrous degree. It's so easy for us to overvalue that which we are taught to value; and thus even come to over-need or have an unhealthy dependency upon something we do need.

"I should eat to live," as one has put it, "not live to eat." "I should work to live, and provide for my family, not live to work." "I should shop to live, not live to shop, or shop till we drop," as the saying goes. "Even love," as C.S. Lewis points out — the greatest of all Christian virtues, "becomes a demon when it's exalted to the place of a god (or an idol)." When we make love, as John Lennon did, more important than God, for it is not true that "All you need is love."

ANYTHING, without exception, when it's exalted, valued, or prized more highly by one's affections than it ever should be (and especially when it's prized on par with or more highly than God) has become an idol merely by the fact that it holds such a high place of prominence in our lives — the place that should be reserved for God alone.

What, then, are some possible idols? Tradition / culture / self / patriotism / entertainment / food / sports / health / wealth / the pursuit of happiness / family / the need for approval / career advancement / power / prestige / politics / notoriety / houses / time / comfort / clothes / sex / drugs / music / the need to be in control — or as one person has accurately summed it up — the three main idols in life are people, places and things.

None of those things is innately bad or idolatrous in and of themselves. What then makes such things into idols? Job tells us:

FIRST in verse 24 he essentially tells us that an idol is something other than God that one has placed their trust in — that is, their trust that IT, rather than GOD, will provide for their needs to be supplied. They trust in IT rather than GOD for their overall well-being, and inner sense of peace and contentment. Or as Job puts it in the second half of the verse, their trust for their "security" — "their present and future security" — the thing that delivers them from the anxiety and stress and habitual fears that they won't have what they need to live as they desire. (Not necessarily to live, but to live as they desire — which may be part of the problem! Because very often what we want is more than just having our needs met — what we want is also our wants met as well! And wealth or acquiring fortunes seems a better way and maybe the only way to achieve that desired end.)

Job essentially says: "If I've looked to money in THAT SENSE, that would have been a sin worthy of judgment." WHY? Because it would have been an expression of unfaithfulness to God / disbelief in His ability to provide / and a lack of trust in His promise to provide all our needs.

In that sense the old adage concerning the phrase printed on American money is right! Though it says, "In God We Trust," there is a very real sense in which it should say, "In This God We Trust."

Because for most people the latter is a more accurate description of what their soul, and emotions, or inner being really trusts in, or relies upon for its sense of peace, security, or future provision. Many people I know would much rather win mega-bucks, than trust in God, and His promise to us in His word that He WILL provide for all our needs. For them money in the bank is a surer object of trust than God's promise taken in faith.

How do I know most people in the U.S. trust more in their money than in God's promise? Because every time the stock market burps, dips or plunges, people get real nervous! Even Christian people. As if Wall Street, and not God had the last word on providing, and was ultimately the source of our economic stability, and financial prosperity. And as if Mr. Greenspan was the omnipotent and omniscient mind controlling providence!!!

But don't hear me wrong — or Job. Its not just money — it's ANYTHING we trust in other than God (or more than God) to meet our needs, quell or anxieties and fears about the future, and guarantee we'll be provided for. God does use secondary means to provide for our needs — but the test as to whether they have become idols for us is what we trust in most? What gives us the greatest sense of peace and inner security.

Then SECONDLY, something becomes an idol for us when it we look to IT, rather than to GOD, as the source of our joy and happiness. When Job says, "If I have rejoiced over my great wealth..." he means, if I have allowed IT, instead of GOD, to become for me the source of my joy or happiness; the thing that caused my heart to rejoice, that would have been a sin for God to judge — because that would have been looking more to a created thing than to God for my joy and happiness, and thus an expression of unfaithfulness to God (or put more simply, an expression of idolatry).

You see, throughout history mankind has incessantly fallen into the trap of thinking that money brings happiness. That's why Scripture itself constantly warns the people of God not to fall prey to it. Because God knows we are all incessantly tempted to believe that very thing.

Thus, what do we read in the Bible?

"The joy of the Lord is my strength" (Neh. 8:10). "YOU will fill me with joy in Your presence" (Ps. 16:11). "YOU have made me glad with the joy of Your presence"(Ps. 21:6). "YOU have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (I have greater joy in YOU

than they have when they're partying with wine over a plentiful harvest!) (Ps. 4:7). "I will go to God," says David, "my joy and my delight." (Ps. 43:4)

Over and over again we are told that the ultimate source of all true and lasting joy is God Himself. Scripture makes that clear from beginning to end. Yet as much as the Bible repeatedly states that, people still tend to ignore it, disbelieve it, and look instead to other things as the source of their joy and happiness.

Yet Blaise Pascal, the brilliant French Physicist beautifully summarized the Bible's teaching on joy and happiness when he wrote:

"There was once in man a true happiness (that is, before the Fall) of which there now remains to him only an empty trace which he vainly tries to fill with things from his environment. Yet all these efforts are inadequate, because the infinite abyss (in the human soul) can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object—that is, God Himself."

He's right you know. People look to so many things, including money, to fill that gnawing, inner sense of emptiness — to fill them with joy and happiness — only to discover that the Bible is right and those things just don't satisfy. They don't "fill the infinite abyss," as Pascal put it, because that infinite abyss can only be filled by God, who alone is infinite and immutable. The human soul is like a black hole that consumes all things finite, but God, being a Spirit, infinite and eternal, can never be consumed or exhausted — which is why He alone can fill, and satisfy the longings and thirst of the human soul.

So often we look to people, places and things to make us happy — as the source of our joy — to jobs, and houses and career advancement and the acquisition of wealth, only to become disappointed when we find they just don't satisfy. It's a painful process we could avoid altogether if we just learn to do what the Bible tells us, and:

Go to God, who is our JOY and DELIGHT, the God who fills us with JOY in His presence, and whose JOY is our strength.

Other things bring an occasional sense of relief. Created things can produce brief moments of joy — like the Jewish parties at harvest time. Finite things can bring produce fleeting experiences of passing happiness. But only God — only Jesus, can give us "water that will become in us a spring welling up to eternal life." Because only through Him do we receive the Holy Spirit — the living water from which we drink and never thirst again.

Having an idol is like having a glass of luke-warm water. Having God is like having a never-ending spring of refreshing cool water welling up from deep within you soul. You have a cup that habitually “runneth over”!

Then LAST, we can know we have idols if our hearts are secretly enticed to adore something and offer it the kiss of homage. That is, if IT rather than GOD catches our constant affectionate notice. Job says, “If I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in its splendor...” That is, if it’s beauty had caught my eye and captivated my heart — if I was mesmerized by its radiance, or enthralled by its attractiveness — so much so that I considered it more beautiful than God, then that would have been a sin worthy of judgment and unfaithfulness to God who is to be the sole object of our ultimate desiring, adoration, and supreme affections.

David says in Psalm 27:4:

“One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and seek Him in His temple.”

Do YOU find God to be “beautiful”? Do you worship Him for the beauty of His holiness? Or have you secretly found something else (some created thing) to be more beautiful than Him?

You know how to tell if you have? Merely look at your heart or your behavior. We are enticed by that which we find most beautiful. We offer to the object we find most beautiful, or pleasurable — our kiss of adoration and our willing service.

Which means that every time we disobey God (whether we think about it or not) it’s ultimately because at that very moment, something else has come to appear more beautiful, radiant, and splendid to us than God. Whatever captivates our hearts, calls forth our willing and faithful service. Which means that whenever we catch ourselves struggling between the choice to obey God or disobey God it’s really the struggle of choosing between two things we love or desire most.

LISTEN: The object we love or desire most at any given moment in time will always win out.

So today I tell you again: most idols are not statues! They are things we have elevated to a place of prominence in our lives that only God should hold. And if you’ve realized today, as I spoke, that you have some idols, I admonish you, in Jesus name, to repent of them. To turn away from them. To put them in their proper place.

In fact, let me close with the final line from my church covenant in Westport, MA, which said of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "To Him I dedicate my Supreme affections. To His service and glory I consecrate my life."

Do it my friends — renounce all idols, and turn from all other things that entice your heart away from God, and ask you to offer them "the kiss of homage."

Dedicate to God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) your supreme affections — for they should be His alone. And consecrate your life to His service and glory.

To do otherwise, says Job, is a sin worthy of judgment, and an act of heart treason, or unfaithfulness to God on high.