

# Getting to the Heart

## #2 How Would I Spot an Idol in My Own Heart?

### Approach:

Idolatry is really false worship. It's misplaced and misdirected worship... and it can happen in a church... and it can even happen in the heart of a pastor or pastor's wife...

You can do it with work... you can do it with pleasure... you can do it with family... you can do it with church...

- So how would you know if something's an appropriate joy – or has become an inordinate desire (as the Puritans used to say)... or an idol?

Let me give you

### I. Three Ways to Track Down Idols in Your Life

- A. Follow the Trail of Your Time, Money, and Affection ~ look for clues – that's what Columbo does... that's what Monk does... and that's what we need to do with the help of the Holy Spirit!

**The worship leader Louie Giglio pulls no punches** when he writes, “Some of us attend the church on the corner (*and I would say, ‘Some of us lead the church on the corner*), professing to worship the living God above all. Others, who rarely darken the church doors, would say worship isn't a part of their lives because they aren't "religious." But everybody has an altar. And every altar has a throne.

So how do you know where and what you worship? It's easy. You simply follow the trail of your time, your affection, your energy, your money, and your allegiance. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whomever, is on that throne is what's of highest value to you. On that throne is what you worship.

Sure, not too many of us walk around saying, "I worship my stuff. I worship my job. I worship this pleasure. I worship her. I worship my body. I worship me!" But the trail never lies. We may say we value this thing or that thing more than any other, but the volume of our actions speaks louder than our words. In the end, our worship is more about what we do than what we say.”

*The Air I Breathe (Worship as a way of Life), Louie Giglio, pg. 10 & 11*

- What about you?
- If someone had been following you around this past year – tailing you... staking you out... taking notes...
  - watching what makes you angry...
  - what makes you sad...
  - what makes you laugh?
  - And watching where you spend your money... your time... your affections –
- What would they decide is the most important thing to you...

- And what would they conclude is ruling on the ‘throne’ of your heart?

Lemme give you some other clues to investigate...

See... whenever there’s a legitimate desire that starts morphing into an idolatrous demand on the throne of your heart you’ll likely do a number of the following things:

You’ll...

- a. **Sacrifice** for it
- b. **Spend Time** on it
- c. **Spend Money** on it
- d. **Talk** about it
- e. **Serve** it
- f. **Protect it** / defend it
- g. **Perfect it**
- h. **Think** about it
- i. **Worry** about it
- j. **Get Angry** when someone blocks you from it - or messes with it
- k. **Build your Schedule** around it

So follow the trail of your time, money, and affections...

2ndly – how you gonna track down an idol?

## **B. Look for Chaos!**

Did you know the idols of our heart create chaos? Umm humm.

Listen to me... If you’ve got idols in the heart... you got chaos... to some degree or another. But it doesn’t jump right out at you. We don’t usually make that connection. Our sights are set somewhere else. Our first thought is that life’s just not turning out the way we thought it would... and we feel like the people around us are just being so difficult and unreasonable. That’s usually our first thought. Isn’t it? People are in my way... and are not helping me get what I want.

Turn with me in your Bibles and follow along as I read **James 4:1-4**

**James 4:1-4** “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your own pleasures.”

See... on any given day our mind just swirls with desires that have not materialized yet...

I was gonna be pastoring a large successful church by now... not still slugging it out as a solo pastor trying to get it all done by myself...

I was gonna have two or three children by now...

I was gonna be watching my retirement income blossom with compound interest...

I was gonna be building my dream home... not mortgaging the one we have to pay off consumer debt...

I was gonna be slowing down and enjoying the retirement years... traveling and visiting the grandkids – instead I'm visiting doctors and specialists just to keep my body going and free from pain...

Life's not worked out the way you thought it would... and if we're not careful – as the clock continues to tick, our appropriate desires can morph into idolatrous demands that create a cloud of confusion and chaos that surround both us and the loved ones around us.

**Here's the bottom line** for most of us this afternoon:

Idolatry is not so much wanting the **wrong** thing... but wanting even good things **too** much.

The Puritans referred to it as having an **inordinate** desire.

It's where you lose your sense of a biblical **priority**. And you end up **sacrificing** biblically important things on the **altar** of your idolatrous desires.

- So how do you know if the desire is 'inordinate' or out of balance?
  - Take golf for instance... Golf could be an idol... or it could be simply a pleasure and an enjoyable form of relaxation.
  - Children can be an idol or they can just be gifts from God that you're training and equipping to leave the nest and serve Him.
  - Your church can be an idol... or it could be a wonderful calling – with an opportunity to use your skills to the glory of God.
- How do you know? Which is it? It's tough to know sometimes. But by their fruits you will know them.

Idolatrous desires produce **toxic** fruit! So look for the fruit.

**James 3:16** “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there.”

And one of the places this chaos shows up most quickly and most painfully – is in our relationships with the people closest to us... husbands... wives... kids... parents... church staff... church leaders... are the ones that bear the brunt of so much of our idolatry every day – and we think they're the ones causing our problems... getting in our way... blocking us... frustrating us... and not helping us get what we want.

**Paul Tripp** writes, “Why does it seem that people, things, and situations are in our way? Why do we seldom go through a day without some experience of conflict? The answer to all of these questions is that we think of our lives as our own, and we are more committed to the purposes of our own kingdom than we are to God's. We need to recognize that the people in our way have been sent to us by a wise and sovereign King.

He never gets a wrong address and always chooses just the right moment to expose our hearts and realign them to His.”

*Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, Paul David Tripp, p. 106 & 107

But that's hard to believe sometimes, isn't it?

God... this is the absolute worst time that this could be happening...

- that family that's upset and leaving the church
- the fallout with my spouse
- the blowup with my teenager

Remember - God never gets a wrong address! And He always chooses the right moment to expose our hearts! I don't know what you're going through – and I don't know where your greatest conflict is right now... but God does! And He didn't get a wrong address.

You see... the problem isn't really your spouse or that person at church. It's a heart problem. We've got heart problems.

The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.

The real problem under the surface of all our conflicts is that two kingdoms are colliding.  
What's ruling your heart, and what's ruling my heart are meeting head on...

and we both can't be 'King' at the same time.

- One of my idols was “I must be well thought of by everyone at church” – never say ‘No’
- One of Vicki's ruling idols was “I must have the perfect godly family” that will be on the cover of *Focus on the Family*

And I know that doesn't sound as ugly as pornography... or drug abuse... or embezzlement... or adultery... but the war that broke out between us was fierce and ugly beyond anything I would've ever imagined possible between us! 'Cause two kingdoms were colliding... two thrones were crashing into each other as we both tried to promote our own agenda... and the sparks flew... the explosions erupted... tears flowed... and walls went up and we both began to entrench ourselves in a defensive position.

In his little booklet, *Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?*, Ed Welch says, “Here is a general principle: your attitude toward God will be revealed in your worst human relationship. If you hate someone, you are ultimately hating God. If you don’t forgive, you are usurping God’s authority to act as judge.” P. 16

In James 4:1-3 James is connecting our conflicts with other people to the internal war that’s already going on in our own hearts. Here’s what happens...

If my heart is ruled by a certain desire, there are only TWO WAYS I can respond to you:

- (1) If you’re HELPING me get what I want, I’ll be happy with you... treat you well... allow you into my world
- (2) But if you STAND in my way, I will be angry, frustrated, and testy when I am with you. There will be times when I wish you weren’t even in my life.

You stand in the way of what I CRAVE so I lash out at you... or I push you away... or shut you out.

**Dave Powlison** says, “I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt, self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1-3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts. Why do you fight? It’s not ‘because my wife/ husband...’ – it’s because of something about *you*. Couples who see what rules them – cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life – can repent and find God’s grace made real to them, and then learn how to make peace.” David Powlison, *Seeing With New Eyes*, p. 151

### Cravings underlie conflicts!

So what have you been craving lately? Where have you been having conflict? The two are not unrelated.

#### **Let me give you some examples:**

- It’s not wrong to desire relaxation at the end of a long day. But it’s wrong to be ruled by relaxation to such an extent that I’m angry with anyone who gets in the way of me and my relaxation.
- Ladies - It’s not wrong to desire the tender affection and attention of your husband. But it’s wrong to be so ruled by that desire that your days are filled with bitterness and manipulation and depression because your desire is not getting met.
- Guys – it’s not wrong to desire the esteem and respect from your wife and other people in life but it’s idolatry to live every day with a hyper-sensitivity and demand for it – that either spirals into depression or explodes in anger whenever your path crosses someone that doesn’t give you the respect you think you deserve.

### **Let me give you an example from my own life -**

An outburst of anger is a call to take some time to figure out what it is that you're craving in that moment – because anger is simply an emotion that expresses your displeasure at either losing something you've decided is essential – or not getting something you've set your heart on.

Some of you've heard me say it before, but it was a slow burning anger and resentment in the early years of our marriage that drove me to the point of having a public shouting match with my sweet wife, Vicki, right there in the middle of the Olan Mills Photography waiting room in Knoxville, TN one Christmas – and in front of my whole extended family! Brothers, mother, father... and other strangers I didn't even know. And the colorful Christmas sweater I had on couldn't make up for the ugliness that spewing out of my mouth. And all because Vicki stepped over to me and asked if we could stop and get some diapers at the store on the way home. And I lost it... and erupted in anger... explaining how that's something that she should've already taken care of. So often an alarm system that alerts us to the threatening of an idol.

Why did I lose it right there like that? Why did her question set me off so? Because there was something I'd been craving... and worshipping... and protecting... and defending – long before she asked me that question. I'd been building a fortress around the idea that I deserved a break. I'm in seminary full time... I'm working at the church practically full time... I'm changing the oil in the car... doing the checkbook. I'm doing so much... it's so hard – and therefore my wife should make no demands of me. It was basically the idol of "I-Deserve-A-Break" and so those around me should simply serve me and make little or demands of me. And if you break those unspoken rules you'll have my wrath to deal with.

Now... was I conscious of this ruling idol? Had I written it down anywhere? Shared it with my close friends? No way. I'd never written it down. I'd never shared it in a prayer group with other guys. I'd never even sat and articulated it to myself... but you could trace the lava of my anger back to my idolatrous craving heart. My anger erupted because I was not getting what I wanted... I was not being treated the way I thought I should be treated.

And the same is true for me today... I can't remember the last time I got angry with Vicki but my anger most often erupts now with the kids. Something is happening and I don't like it. There's a conflict or a fight or a bad attitude or a failure to fulfill responsibilities – and so then I really help the whole situation by erupting in anger and spitting out sharp words of rebuke and castigation to everyone involved.

- What's going on? Well... there's an idol in my heart that keeps trying to take over the throne during these parenting years. It's the idol of "I deserve things to run smoothly – and I want everyone to just do the things we've taught you." Do it – every day – every time – without exception. I shouldn't have to be re-training... and redoing... and unraveling problems because you aren't doing what we've taught you.

Get with it! And if you don't – you'll have my wrath to deal with.

Sound familiar? Anybody else struggle with that one? Or is that just me?

So look for confusion and chaos and chaos in your relationships with people around you – and almost always you can trace it back to an idol of the heart. Idols bring chaos like rats bring disease and some of you are living with it every day. You know what I'm talking about! But you've wondered what the source of the problem is.

Follow the trail of your time, money, and affections.  
Look for chaos.

And...

### C. Ask Hard Questions

I wanna give you **3 Heart Diagnostic Questions** that you can ask yourself to help you get your hands around whether or not something is an idol

1. Am I willing to sin to Get it?
  - That proposal or new ministry you want to see launched at the church – are you willing to gossip and slander those who are slow to approve it? Are you willing to jockey for position and resort to the weapons of the world to try and make it happen? Or are you willing to trust God... wait on God... rest in God? It's tough I know!
  - Are you willing to uproot and move your family cross country regardless of the impact on your wife and kids – and their schooling and their friends... just to get away from a difficult situation... or just to chase down that bigger and better position for you?
2. Am I willing to sin if I think I'm going to Lose it?
  - Health – Taking care of you body's not a sin –
  - But when you start to spend hours every day at the gym in order to hold on to that ideal physique that you still see in younger people – and some your own age still have. And by doing this you neglect your other God-given responsibilities or mishandle your finances to support this habit... then it's probably moved past healthy concern and into idolatry.
  - Hair – If I start spending thousands of dollars to try to get the hair on the back of my neck to grow on top of my head – even if we really don't have the money – and the money could be better invested into God's kingdom work – then it just might be an idol.
3. Do I run to it for 'Refuge' instead of turning to God?

**Biblical counselor Dave Powlison** says, "I remember the time I counseled a man who habitually escaped life's pressures into TV, food, video games, alcohol, pornography, antique collecting, sci-fi novels. Where to begin? Could I find a passage to focus his problems? I wasn't sure what to pick up on. Then it struck me: Try the Psalms—as a whole! Almost every single Psalm, in some way or other, portrays the Lord as our refuge in trouble. The Psalms implicitly and explicitly rebuke taking refuge in anything less; the Psalms offer steadfast love and mercy; the Psalms spur us to know and obey God in the trenches of life. This man felt vaguely guilty for some of his bad behavior. But he didn't see the pattern or the seriousness. His efforts at change were half-baked and unsuccessful. Conviction of the specific sin of his heart-turning from the living God in order to seek idolatrous refuge—woke him up, and made him see his behavioral sins in a fresh way. He even began to identify little escapist tricks he hadn't even realized he did—ways he (mis)used humor or made subtle excuses for himself. Christ's grace became very real and necessary. He became motivated to practical change—to face pressures and responsibilities to God's glory."

- shopping
- Eating
- Working on my car
- Staying late at work
- Watching movies or playing computer games

**Identifying Personal ‘Idols’ – See orange handout sheet**

### **Questions to ask Yourself**

**Place a Check Mark Next to Items**

**Now write Top 5 Idols on last page**

[www.graceky.org / Ministries / Counseling / Pastor Brad's Resources / IdolsofHeart - IdentifyingWorksheet](http://www.graceky.org/Ministries/Counseling/PastorBrad'sResources/IdolsofHeart-IdentifyingWorksheet)

- What about you today?
- When you ask those 3 questions – what areas come to the surface?
- And is there chaos and confusion in some of your relationships? Chances are idolatry may be at the root of it – because there's two kingdoms in conflict.

What I want is running on head into what other people around me want.

## **II. What Happens When I Repent?**

Now that I've got you thinking about idols of the heart... I hope you're seeing how crucial this is to fighting sin in your life...

And I hope you understand better than ever that...

**Jonah 2:8** “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

So I wanna try to excite you about what you can expect as a result of identifying and repenting of your idols. I wanna to leave you hungry for repentance! And I'm hoping you'll walk out of here excited about the kind of fruit that can show up in your life when you start repenting of idols of the heart.

### **“Idolatry Repentance Plan”**

[www.graceky.org / Ministries / Counseling / Pastor Brad's Resources / IdolsofHeart – RepentanceWorksheet](http://www.graceky.org/Ministries/Counseling/PastorBrad'sResources/IdolsofHeart-RepentanceWorksheet)

- Change your thinking
- Change your actions



Listen to me... Identifying your idols is a great start... but that's not the end. If you don't make specific plans for overcoming those idols you'll just keep right on living with them rumbling around in your life. Most people fail to change because they don't make specific plans to change.

Lemme me show you some of the fruit you can expect from repenting of idols of the heart...

**A. You'll Start to Really Get Free ~** Some of you maybe for the very first time! You'll Have So Much More Freedom to Serve God & Run Unhindered Towards Godliness

**Hebrews 12:1-2** "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..."

See... your idols... and my idols do two things that this verse talks about – they weigh us down and they keep us from seeing...

Remember... to run effectively you need to be able to see the finish line clearly – and to see Christ – and idols get in the way of all that!

**Ezekiel 14:3** "... these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity... v. 5 they are all estranged from me by their idols."

Living with idols is like trying to run with your hand in front of your face. You can do it – but not very effectively.

**B. You'll Have a Revival of Gratitude for the Gospel ~** You'll Experience a Greater Understanding *of* & Appreciation *for* the Gospel

**I Corinthians 1:17** "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

**Biblical counselor, Ed Welch**, says, "The path of change goes through the heart and continues on to the Gospel, where God chose to most fully reveal Himself in the death and resurrection of Christ."

When you begin to understand idols more – you begin to see your need for the gospel more. And when I talk about needing the Gospel – I'm not referring to salvation. I'm talking about preaching the Gospel to yourself every day. When you start seeing your idols on a regular basis you'll be running to the gospel on a regular basis.

### C. You Might Start to See Yourself and Others Clearly for the Very First Time

**Matthew 7: 3-5** “Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck out of your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

**Francois Fenelon wrote**, “As the inner light increases, you will see the imperfections which you have heretofore seen as basically much greater and more harmful than you had seen them up to the present...But this experience, far from discouraging, will help to uproot all your self-confidence, and to raze to the ground the whole edifice of pride. Nothing marks so much the solid advancement of a soul, as this view of his wretchedness without anxiety and without discouragement.”

- In the first few years of our marriage, while my heart was raging with my own idols I couldn’t see clearly to even talk to Vicki about the ways I perceived that she was sinning against me in our marriage. It was skewed... twisted... and twisted in my favor!
- My idols twisted my perception
- Your own idols blind you to your own sins and usually magnify and exaggerate the sins of other people around you
- And you start to feel angry and mistreated... and feel sorry for yourself.

So you have to decide - Are you primarily deprived or depraved?

- Is your biggest problem deprivation or depravity?

That’s a decision you’re gonna have to make... and our culture – even the Christian community points us towards deprivation. I am the way I am largely because of how I’ve been deprived... of the right parents... or the right friends... or the right education... or the right opportunities.

And our idols continually tell us we’re ‘deprived!’ Am I a guilty sinner that needs to deal with my own sin? Or is my life characterized by the way everyone else around me has been sinning against me?

- Am I just a victim?

Let me tell you something, biblically there’s no question what we are. We’re depraved. That’s biblical. But when you look at popular Christian literature, they say you’re deprived. You’re an empty ‘love cup’ according to Minirth Meier. But that’s bogus and unbiblical... even those Christians have bought into it.

And it’s not hard to figure out why either!

Illus. It’s like the difference between Gollum in the “Lord of the Rings” and a little empty ‘love cup.’ The Bible says we’re Gollum... clinging to our sin ‘my precious... my precious...’ craving... and demanding... and willing to kill to get it... while the world say ‘No – I’m an empty love cup’ (Start singing ‘I’m an empty love cup short and stout...’)

Which way would you rather see yourself as? Huh? Which is more attractive? Love cup or Gollum? We're gonna pick 'Love Cup' every time, aren't we? But it's wrong. The Bible tells us it's wrong.

Now please don't hear me saying that no one in this room has been deprived or abused by other people. Many of you have! Your parents... your spouse... a boss... a church leader... a church member, etc.

But listen to me... the most loving thing I could do is tell you to not buy into the 'victim' mentality and live your life thinking that your biggest problem is what other people around you have done to you. Don't live in the past. Don't live tied to other people. Your focus should be on your own depravity... not your deprivation... and that will set you free!

My depravity far outweighs my deprivation... and so does yours! And my focus needs to be on my own sin — rather than continually rehearsing the way others around me have sinned against me or not met my 'felt needs' or filled my 'love cup.'

**D. You'll Feel More Conviction of Sin ~ You'll Have a Greater Conviction of Sin and the Ability to Forsake It**

**Proverbs 28:13-14** "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy... but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity."

See... idols so many times are what keep us from the 'and forsakes them' part! Idols whisper to us to just hang on a little bit longer. Don't get so radical... you might want this again... you just might need this.

**Ephesians 4:18-19** "They darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."

You'll have the conviction of sin and the ability to forsake it rather than the paralyzing and often prideful self-condemnation that leaves you just wallowing and unable to get past it.

**E. Your Passion and Love for God and Your Savior Will Soar!**

**Blaise Pascal got it right** when he said, "Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because He shows us both God and our own wretchedness."

**Luke 7:47** "Therefore I say to you, her sins which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

I want you to turn with me to the end of Luke, chapter 7. You follow along as I read **v. 36-47**

Look at v. 47 again, “I tell you her...,” *what?* “Many...,” “Her many sins have been forgiven for she loved...,” *what?* I want you to see those two words, ‘Many’ and ‘Much.’ I want you to make a connection here!

Then notice the next phrase, “But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

**Now don’t get confused here.** Her ‘much love’ is not the cause for her many sins to be forgiven. Her ‘much love’ is the *evidence* that her many sins have been forgiven. Her much love is the consequence of her many sins which have been forgiven... not the cause.

And whenever we start to think that we just don’t have that much to be forgiven of, there’ll be a loss of passion... affection... adoration... and worship for the living God. We should stay overwhelmed on a regular basis for the many sins we’re forgiven. Dealing with the idols of your heart helps you do that!

Because as pastors and pastor wives you’re probably avoiding most of the ‘big sins’ - so if we’re not careful we can become unaware of how serious and pervasive remaining sin is in our lives... but dealing with idols drives it home!

### **Conclusion:**

- Are you ready to shut down the idol factory? I hope so!

**Let’s pray.**