

“American Idols”
Ephesians 5:1-20
Sermon Series: Breaking Bad – Week 2. No Idols
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Every September, 1,100 well-dressed guests gather in the hallowed halls of Harvard University to give out a very special award: the ten most ridiculous research projects in science. They are called the "Ig Nobel" Prize (the opposite of the Nobel Prize) and they recognize the silliest scientific studies to receive funding. For example:

Robert Matthews of Aston University, England, studied Murphy's Law in order to prove the toast often falls on the buttered side.

Len Fisher of Sydney, Australia won for calculating the optimal way to dunk a biscuit.

Chris Niswander of Tucson, Arizona received an award for inventing PawSense, software designed to detect when a cat walks across your computer keyboard.

Buck Weimer of Pueblo, Colorado won for inventing Under-Ease, a brand of underwear with a built-in, replaceable charcoal filter that deodorizes flatulence before it is released into the atmosphere.

Award shows – they seem to be multiplying. There are the annual Emmys, Oscars, Grammys, and Golden Globes. They are championship awards and trophies for the Olympics, hockey, baseball, soccer, basketball and, of course, football. There are awards in business, medicine, government, literature, art. Believe it or not, the second highest monetary prize, higher than even the Nobel Prize, is the Templeton Prize for religion and spirituality.

Awards designate someone as the best of the best. They also reveal our idols – the people we idolize, admire and adore. In a way, they expose what we aspire to be. Sometimes we imagine ourselves receiving one of these top awards or maybe an award in our field. There's nothing wrong with excellence and achievement...except when it crosses the line into worship.

How do you know when someone or something has become an idol in your life? Ask yourself these questions: What makes you change your schedule, spend your precious time and give up your hard earned money? What drives you to change your behavior? What causes you to ignore your values, put aside your morals and ethics, or act against your beliefs? What do you put first before time with your family, your health, your faith in God? What do you keep secret? These answers will reveal your idols.

Here are five possible idols: possessions, popularity, power, pleasure, position.

What's so wrong with having an idol? Over time we become like the thing we worship. If possession is our idols, we are always on the hunt for bigger, better, shinier, newer, more. If money is our god we reduce every relationship down to the bottom line of what it will cost us. If popularity is our idol, we hunger for affection and acceptance and we will do whatever we can to please people. If we serve power, we leave a path of destruction in our wake. If a position is our aim, it doesn't matter who we have to push out of our way including our family as we ascend the ladder. If pleasure is our goal, no matter how much we ingest, inject, imbibe or indulge, we will never have enough.

And that's one of the tragic truths about idols – they always demand more of us and we never feel satisfied. Recently LeBron James left the Cleveland Cavaliers and signed with the Los Angeles Lakers for \$154 million. Considered by some to be the greatest basketball player in the world, James has won numerous awards including four league MVPs, three NBA championships and two Olympic gold medals. Yet in a USA Today interview, James was surprised how quickly the euphoria of success wore off.

What really got to me when we won the NBA championship was how short of a time it lasted. The championship lasts (he snaps his fingers) just like that. The confetti rains, you go in the locker room, pop the champagne, you do the media, you have the parade and then it's over. It's over. You're looking around, and everybody's back to normal. I was like, "Wow, that was an unbelievable 48 hours. I want it again." It was the best 48 hours of my life, and I needed that again ... I have a drive that's burning inside of me, and I want to continue to be successful.¹

People, places and things are not bad. Achievements and awards are not wrong. They just don't work as idols. They aren't worthy of worship. They were not meant to be.

Humans are by nature idol makers. Someone has said, "God made humans in His image and humans have been returning the favor ever since." We take everything God gives and turn it into an idol, an object of worship, obedience and sacrifice. This is why I say there are no atheists or agnostics. They have simply chosen other gods and idols to worship. The Lord takes this so seriously He covers it in His first two commandments:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:3-5).

The ancient world was full of gods and idols. Like the Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Edomites all worshiped a hierarchy of gods and goddesses, a massive bureaucracy of deities. Sun and moon, storms, soil and sea were all represented by gods. It was the job of humans to please them all with animal sacrifices.

¹ Jeff Zillgitt, "Heat's LeBron still not satisfied," USA Today (10-29-13)

Worshipping one God was a new, rare and revolutionary truth. The Lord brought them out of Egypt and gave them the Promised Land. The Lord alone would be their God.

So why did the Israelites bow down to the false idols of other nations? Before we judge them, remember the Israelites were first slaves and then nomads. They had never been farmers. So when they try to farm the land they decide to ask the experts – their neighbors. The Canaanites tell them the way to have fertile fields, flocks, and families is to make offerings to the fertility gods – Baal and Asherah. “That’s the way you get things to grow in this land,” say their pagan neighbors. So instead of trusting the Lord who brought them there, the Lord who created the Sun, rain, fields and flocks, they turn and fall in lock step with what everyone else is doing. That’s the way to get success.

Sound familiar? Why do we worship our gods? That’s what we see everyone else doing. “If you want to get ahead, if you want to be successful you have to do this...” “If you want to be popular you’ve got to wear this, try this, act like this...” “If you want to fit in you have to stop believing that and start thinking like this...” Money, fashion, trends, feelings, opinions, substances, approval, desires. These are our gods, our American idols. This is what we see everyone else doing. When we bow down and worship them, God does not smite us. He gives us over to them. He gives us our wish. Why does it take some people so long to turn to the Lord? Often, they will not cry out to God for help until their false gods fail them. Stubbornness and pride can be strong. Unfortunately they need to learn the hard way. Some people never learn.

One of the dangers is we can lose our identity in our idol. Sports Illustrated named Ronda Rousey the “world's most dominant athlete.” At 14 she was the youngest woman to ever qualify for the Olympics, the first US woman ever to win an Olympic medal in Judo; consistently one of the top three ranked judo champions in the world before transitioning into mixed martial arts, where she quickly dominated and became a world champion; Eight of her twelve challengers were defeated in less than a minute. And then, in November 2015, she lost—badly. Shortly after that she said,

I was literally sitting there and thinking about killing myself and at that exact second I'm like, 'I'm nothing. What do I do anymore? And, no one cares about me anymore without this.'

Her whole identity was inseparable from her image as the “most dominant athlete in the world.” Without this identity she was nothing! She felt she was good for nothing. She was unlovable.²

If worshipping an idol makes you become like it, the Good News is worshipping Jesus can do the same. Paul tells the Ephesians, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (5:1). The closer we get to Jesus, the more we worship Him, the more we imitate Him, the more Christ-like we become.

² Brent L. White, "Sermon 3-6-16: Believing the Word," (3-11-16)

Paul's first direction is: **Live a Life of Love, Not Lust.** He writes,

Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ or of God. (Ephesians 5:2-5).

How is lust different than love? The simple answer is lust takes, but love gives. Lust begins with curiosity and slowly leads us into toxic territory. In Brazil two men illegally broke into an abandoned building searching for scrap metal they could sell. They found a container and wheeled it home. Puncturing a hole in the side they saw a deep blue light within. The thieves sold the container to a local scrapyard.

The owner of the scrapyard noticed the blue glow from the punctured capsule. Thinking the capsule's contents were valuable or even supernatural, he immediately brought it into his house. Over the next three days, he invited friends and family to view the strange glowing substance.

When the scrapyard workers took it apart they found shiny bluish dust. Attracted by the pretty powder, several people handled it, examined it, and even rubbed it on their skin. Soon many people became very sick. The glowing blue dust was radioactive material. The stolen container was an obsolete and forgotten machine used to treat cancer patients. The curious blue glow caused four deaths and left 112,000 people with radioactive contamination. Several houses had to be destroyed and the International Atomic Energy Agency labeled it as "one of the world's worst radiological incidents."³ Used in the proper way, the radioactive substance brought healing to cancer patients. Yet outside its safe and proper use, it poisoned a whole community.

Lust is taking a good thing and using it outside its intended purpose. Money, food, medicine, alcohol and sex are normal. But lust creates an unnatural hunger for them. It starts with curiosity. It provides initial excitement. We crave more and more. We force something normal to fill a need that only God can satisfy. The result is often destructive and disastrous. Lust takes. Lust is never satisfied. Lust destroys. Love gives. Love brings life. Love begins with Jesus who "loved us and gave himself up for us." Live a life of love, not lust.

To get rid of idols, Paul also teaches us to **Live in the Light, not the Darkness.**

He continues in verse 8:

³ Marlise Simons, "Brazil Gets Help on Radiation Accident" New York Times (10-11-87)

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. (Ephesians 5:8-14).

The best way to uncover your idol is ask yourself what you are hiding. What do you keep secret? What do you do when no one is watching? Most of us are deathly afraid to have our dark side revealed. Yet the more we hide it, the stronger it becomes. Like mold or fungus that grows in the dark, our sins, lusts and idolatries spread and multiply the longer we keep them covered up. We need not tell everyone. Bringing them out in the open to God and to a trusted Christian mentor begins to break the power they hold over us. Exposing them to God's Light, the very thing we fear, is the best cure of all. Some try to drink their problems away. But Paul tells us we have a different Spirit who can solve our pain and satisfy our hunger. He writes, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (v. 18). Alcohol, lust and other drugs only deaden the pain and create more misery. The Spirit heals the pain and fills you with the fruit of goodness, righteousness and truth. Alcohol, lust and other drugs drive you deeper into the darkness. The Spirit fills you with Light. And the more you are filled with the Spirit, the less room you have for the darkness of sin.

Of all the people, places or things you could choose to worship in this world, why should you choose Jesus? He is the only One who gave His all for you without asking anything in return. He is the only One, by the power of the Holy Spirit, who can heal you from within.

I started this sermon with Award shows. MTV is usually the place where all the idols of America are presented and promoted. It's not known for encouraging people to worship God or follow Christ. Its highest prize is the MTV Generation Award for great achievement in movies. It's "given to an artist who has shown us a variety of impressive roles, a personal and professional flair and of course, an awesome level of talent." This year's winner Chris Pratt, star of Jurassic World now in theaters, surprised everyone by giving not 10 by 9 rules for living. Among them are:

#2 You have a soul. Be careful with it.

#5 It doesn't matter what it is: earn it. A good deed, reach out to someone in pain, be of service. It feels good and it's good for your soul.

#6 God is real. God loves you. God wants the best for you. Believe that. I do.

#8 Learn to pray. It's easy and it's so good for your soul.

#9 Nobody is perfect. People are going to tell you “You’re perfect just the way you are.” You’re not. You are imperfect. You always will be. But there’s a powerful force that designed you that way and if you are willing to accept that you will have Grace. And Grace is a gift. And like the freedom that we enjoy in this country, that Grace was paid for with Somebody else’s blood. Do not forget it. Don’t take it for granted. God bless you.

You have a soul. Be careful with it. The best way to do that is to give to the One who gave His all for you.