

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE — PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE

LESSON 6 — HEART IDOLATRY

BIG IDEA

We’ve said that the Christian walk consists of two repeated steps: repentance and faith. In Lesson Five, we dealt with repentance. Now we turn our attention to the topic of faith. Remember, we grow through believing the gospel. That’s the emphasis of this week’s discussion and exercise. Easy enough, right? This week’s goal is to take “believing the gospel” out of the abstract and make it concrete.

NOTES:



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LESSON 6 ARTICLE — HEART IDOLATRY

Over the past few weeks, we have said that repentance and faith should be the continual, consistent pattern of the Christian life. Last week we examined the nature of true repentance. This week we want to dive deeper into the subject of faith.

Think for a moment about this question: what one thing should I do to grow more as a Christian? If someone asked you that question, how would you respond? Would you suggest some basic spiritual discipline, such as reading the Bible, praying, finding Christian friends, repenting of sin, or learning theology?

The crowds brought this exact query to Jesus in John 6. His answer may surprise you:

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:28–29)

Notice that they are asking Jesus what they must do to live a life that pleases God. Jesus answers that the *work* of God is to *believe*. In other words, the Christian life is not about doing, it is about believing. Getting this right is crucial to sanctification. Most of us are naturally "doers." We gladly embrace the next project, the next challenge, the next assignment. So our pursuit of Christian maturity produces a lot of busy effort, but little lasting change. Why is this so? *Because we are doing too much and believing too little.*

You see, our **surface sins** are only symptoms of a deeper problem. Underneath every external sin is a **heart idol**—a false god that has eclipsed the true God in our thoughts or affections. To paraphrase Martin Luther, every sin is in some way a breaking of the first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me"). Luther wrote, "As [the First] Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed...so also its work, that is, faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all other [works] must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured."¹ In other words, keeping God primary is foundational to spiritual growth. The key to gospel-driven transformation is learning to repent of the "sin beneath the sin"—the deeply rooted idolatry and unbelief that drive our more visible sins.

As a case study, let's take the surface sin of gossip—talking about people behind their backs in judgmental or destructive ways. Why do we gossip? What are we looking for that we should be finding in God?

Here are some common heart idols that can manifest themselves in the surface sin of gossip:

» **The idol of approval** (I want the approval of the people I'm talking to)

¹ Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, section 9, (1520).



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- » **The idol of control** (Using gossip as a way to manipulate/control others)
- » **The idol of reputation** (I want to feel important, so I cut someone else down verbally)
- » **The idol of success** (Someone is succeeding—and I'm not—so I gossip about him)
- » **The idol of security** (Talking about others masks my own insecurity)
- » **The idol of pleasure** (Someone else is enjoying life—and I'm not—so I attack her)
- » **The idol of knowledge** (Talking about people is a way of showing I know more)
- » **The idol of recognition** (Talking about others gets people to notice me)
- » **The idol of respect** (That person disrespected me, so I'm going to disrespect him)

All these idols are false saviors promoting false gospels. Every one of these things—approval, control, reputation, success, security, pleasure, knowledge, recognition, respect—is something we already have in Jesus because of the gospel! But when we are not living in light of the gospel, we turn to these idols to give us what only Jesus can truly give us.

Another way to identify your particular heart idols is to ask *what do I love, trust, or fear?* For example, if I fear being single, “being in a relationship” will probably be my idol (because it promises to deliver me from the “hell” of singleness). If I trust “having enough,” security will probably be my idol (because it promises that I'll never be without anything). If I love order and structure, control will probably be my idol (because if I'm in charge, I can make sure things are in order).

Reflecting on the “sin beneath our sin” shows why the gospel is essential for true heart change. It's possible to repent of surface sins for a lifetime yet never address the deeper heart issues behind them! At the moment I sin, I have already broken the first commandment. An idol has taken God's place in my soul. I am trusting in that idol, rather than in God, to be my Savior. I need to apply the gospel by (1) repenting of my deep heart idolatry and (2) believing—that is, turning my mind toward the specific gospel promises that break the power of my characteristic idols.

According to Dr. Steve Childers, faith “involves learning how to set the affections of our mind and heart on Christ.... Faith requires a continual rehearsing and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours in Christ.”² Notice the two aspects of faith: setting our affections on Christ and delighting in the privileges that are ours in Christ. I must worship Jesus (not my idols), and I must remind myself of what is really true about me because of Jesus.

² Steven L. Childers, “True Spirituality: The Transforming Power of the Gospel,” available at www.gca.cc.



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Let's go back again to our example of gossip. Let's imagine that I have identified respect as the dominant idol that drives me to gossip. After I acknowledge my sin and repent of it, I exercise faith in two ways. First, I pause and worship Jesus because he laid aside his right to be respected, becoming humbled to the point of death (Phil. 2:5–11). Second, I remind myself of the gospel truth that I no longer need to crave the respect of others because I have the approval of God through faith in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17–21). Whether people respect me or not is immaterial: God's grace has freed me from demanding my own respect, and now I live for the fame and honor of Jesus (1 Cor. 10:31).

This exercise is fairly simple in the abstract, but it can be much more difficult when thinking through your own personal patterns of sin. So set aside some intentional time to (1) identify your common surface sins and (2) prayerfully consider what heart idols might lie behind them. Then (3) worship Jesus for his victory over that idol and (4) find specific gospel promises you can rely on to help defeat the power of that idol. Be sure to invite others into your process of reflection and repentance. As one writer has put it, "You can't see your own face." We need each other in order to see our sin clearly and deal with it honestly.

As you learn to live a gospel-centered life, remember that this is the essence of walking with Jesus. Repentance and faith are not steps on the path; they are the path. The work of God is to *believe*.

