Loving False Gods Rejects the Real God

The deception and danger of idols

Jonah 2:8

Chapter 2.12

For a God Time use the “P.O.W.E.R. Plan” in Appendix A.

After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- What is idolatry? Why do people commit this sin?
- How do you know if you have an idol in your life?
- What are some common false gods in our world?
- What protects you from the false god of Money? Why is this?
- What are the consequences of having false gods in your life?
- What was especially meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

She was probably a very pretty woman. She had been married five times and was now living with another man. In spite of all the pain and rejection she had experienced from all those men, she was trying another man. One more sad story of someone looking for love in all the wrong places. We simply know her as “the woman at the well” (cf. John 4:6-7).

Jesus knew her life, and He knew that love was what she was really thirsty for. Having compassion on her He said: “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). Like this woman, Jesus offers you a relationship to satisfy your every need. But many Christians reject God’s offer and ignore His warning:

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. (Jonah 2:8 NIV)

If you seek what you need from anything or anyone other than God, you will increase the pain in your life.

In the previous chapters we discussed the fact that you were created with many needs. The need for Hope, Approval, Protection, Power, Importance, Enjoyment, and Relationship (H.A.P.P.I.E.R.) This is important to understand, because: YOUR GOD IS WHOEVER OR WHATEVER YOU DEPEND ON TO MEET YOUR NEEDS. Your god is what is most important to you, what you will sacrifice for, because your god is what makes you happy.
There are two sources that people seek to find fulfillment: the real God and “false gods.” Jonah warned that “idols” are a “worthless” false god that deceives you into thinking it can make you happy, but actually hurts you. Because you love an idol, and depend on it to satisfy you, you “turn away from God’s love for” you and do not experience the love He has for you.

SIN IS SIMPLY AND ALWAYS AN ATTEMPT TO SATISFY YOUR GOD-GIVEN NEEDS IN A DESTRUCTIVE WAY. The needs are not bad. God created you with them. But when you satisfy your needs for security, acceptance, significance, or pleasure apart from God’s ways, you hurt yourself. Almost all of your trouble and pain and sin will come from trying to find love somewhere or in someone other than God. This was the life of “the woman at the well.”

Remember, all of God’s commands are designed to tell you how to meet your needs in a safe and satisfying way. For example, God created sex and He invented marriage as the safe and satisfying place to experience it. But people ignore God’s commands and become less happy (and even less human) every time they pursue sex in sinful ways.

Again, God created your “heart” to desire happiness, and created you to find that happiness in your relationship with Him. The Bible puts it this way: “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more” (Ps 16:4 NIV). However “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4). God personally invites you to a joyful life in serving Him, rather than false gods. Because: “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them” (Jonah 2:8). If you seek what you need from anything or anyone other than God, you will increase the pain in your life.

The many kinds of false gods

In the OT and in many countries today people worship idols or statues thinking they give them favor with the gods. But the most popular idols today are more spiritual in nature and much more disguised. For example, Jesus warned about the idol of money when He taught:

Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be. . . . No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:21, 24).

Jesus said your “god” is “your treasure” and “the desires of your heart.” A false god is anything or anyone that competes with God for your love and trust. A good example of a false god is “money.” If you believe it will make you feel happy, secure, and valuable, then you will “serve” money as your “master” and it will be your god. As a result, you will not “love” or “be devoted” to God. This is because there is only room for one god in your “heart” and life.
How much does the world worship and love money and depend on it for their security and significance? Money is one of the most popular, powerful, and idolatrous religions in the world and even invades Christianity. Job asked a question you should ask yourself: “Have I put my trust in money or felt secure because of my gold?” (Job 31:24).

How do you know if money or something else is an idol? You feel fear when your idol is threatened, or emptiness even after prolonged devotion. You fear losing money, a job, a person, or your reputation because these are idols and you trust them for your security, significance, and satisfaction.

This is true of money. If your supply is threatened, and you are loving and depending on it more than God, then you will be afraid. Likewise, if you are afraid of giving your money generously, it is probably because it is an idol in your life. The Bible warns: “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6:9-10). Notice that it is not money itself that is evil. It is “the love of money” and your dependence on it to meet your needs that leads to all kinds of evil in your life. This is true of many idols. Enjoying the things of this world is not evil until you love them more than God, and depend on them to meet your H.A.P.P.I.E.R. needs.

How can you protect yourself from the great threat of money to ruin your life and relationship with God? GIVE IT AWAY! The Bible says: Teach those who are rich in this world [which is virtually everyone who lives in America] not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. (1 Tim 6:17)

When you give generously, then God can safely give you more because He knows you do not depend on it for your security and significance (cf. 2 Cor 9:6-11; Mal 3:8-12).

Another result of depending on idols is emptiness. Despite all the hope of security, significance, or satisfaction that a possession, position, or person has promised, you still feel empty and desperate.

Unfortunately, even very good things can be corrupted by idolatry. Parents can make an idol out of their children because they depend on them for their sense of security and significance. Pastors can even make an idol out of their ministry for the same reason. Spiritual gifts can be perverted and even falsely claimed because people are seeking significance in them. People claiming God is revealing things to them through supposed gifts of prophecy, knowledge, discernment, etc. are especially susceptible to this.

Other common false gods are education and occupations. This can happen because money is your god. But it can also be because you depend on degrees or the prestige of your job to feel significant. This may be why you work so hard at school or work. You want to increase the respect you receive from people and feel important. But God said to even slaves: Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive
an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Col 3:23-24 NIV)

Do you see that God wants you to find the true purpose and value of your schooling and working in pleasing Him? Be excellent in all of these things for Him, but not because you need more security or significance from them.

Other powerful false gods are things that make you feel special and better than others. These are things the world greatly values. They include physical looks, intelligence, and athletic ability. Other things the world greatly values but that can be an idol in the search of pleasure is food and entertainment. Notice the warning of Jesus Christ: “What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight” (Luke 16:15 NIV). Again, being athletic, pretty, smart, or having food or entertainment can all be gifts from God. But when they are used to meet your needs for security, significance, and satisfaction then you make them an idol. God hates the things the world loves, and makes into idols, because worshipping them instead of Him hurts people.

This is especially true of sexual immorality and pornography. This is a very powerful false god in the world which promises pain-free pleasure. But the guilt and sense of being worthless that they cause are very painful. The only cure for the false gods of sexual immorality and pornography is to decide that for the rest of your life you will love God more than the pleasure they offer. Do you love your perfect Dad more than the pleasure the Devil offers you in sinful sex? Your actions in this matter clearly answer that question for you and God.

**The danger of false gods**

Idols and false gods of the World trick you into thinking they can make you happy. You pursue and love things and people believing they can meet your deepest needs. But they never can, and they always leave you thirsting for more. This is why Jonah called them “worthless idols.” This is why God asks, “How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?” (Ps 4:2).

There are many sad things about having false gods. First, Jonah says, “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.” Your love for idols hurts God! Listen to what He said through the Prophet Jeremiah: “My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols! The heavens are shocked at such a thing and shrink back in horror and dismay” (Jer 2:11-12).

Because of the love relationship God has with you, you are rejecting Him when you love someone or something else more than Him. God even calls it adultery when He said: “They will recognize how hurt I am by their unfaithful hearts and lustful eyes that long for their idols” (Ezek 6:9; cf. Jas 4:4). Will you recognize this?
Likewise, notice the danger of idols. The Devil wants you to depend on them for your H.A.P.P.I.E.R. needs. Then when you lose that idol, or God even takes it away from you because it is hurting your life, what will you feel? Pain. A lot of pain. And in your pain of losing your false god, the Devil will tempt you to hate God and separate yourself from Him.

It is your love and dependence on idols that make your trials and difficulties much harder than they need to be. For example, if you love and depend on money, how much harder is it to have less of it? If you depend on a job, or ability, or person to make you feel secure and significant it will be very painful if you lose them. Do you see how idols set you up for pain?

Therefore, your love for false gods not only hurts God, but hurts you also. Jonah warned us: "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them" (Jonah 2:8). If you depend on something or someone else to meet your deepest needs, you miss experiencing God’s fulfilling love for you. You settle for the false security and significance another person or thing can give you. You forfeit the blessing of God. But when you have His blessing, you have everything you need and more!

Why is God reluctant to bless you if you love false gods? Because 1) They really will not make you happy, and 2) You will love God’s blessing more than Him. Imagine a child who only loves their dad because of what he gives to them. The child is not interested in a relationship with their dad, but only loves the things they can get from him. The more a dad gives to a child like that, the more they love the gifts rather than their dad. Such gifts actually come between them instead of drawing them closer.

This is one great danger of the “Prosperity Preachers.” They deceive people to believe that happiness is finding your security and significance in the things of the world like money, worldly success, health, and popularity. People who believe them seek and crave those things and experience great disappointment and pain. The “Prosperity Preachers” promote idolatry among the people of God. But now you know better.

"Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them” (Jonah 2:8). If you seek what you need from anything or anyone other than God, you will increase the pain in your life.

► Return to the beginning and answer the questions there.
► Recite Psalm 70:5 from memory.
► Memorize Jonah 2:8 in the translation above or another one.
► Read the next chapter this week to prepare for your Barnabas Group.