

Beyond Addictions

Free to live a new life in Christ Jesus



Addiction as Idolatry

Lesson 3

You don't have to go to heathen lands today to find false gods,
America is full of them.

Whatever you love more than God is your idol.

D.L. Moody

Have you ever worshipped an idol? Millions of people do. They purchase little statues from peddlers, take them home and bow down to the gods that they represent. It is estimated that there are at least 30,000 Hindu gods, some promise healing of various diseases; others are for rain, some for protection from evil spirits. All of them are false. You and I are much too smart to fall for something like that. Right?

Let me ask you a few questions. Have you ever purchased cocaine, methamphetamines or some other drug from a dealer on a street corner? Have you ever sought pleasure in a back alley or a cheap hotel room? Have you ever bought a porn magazine in a convenience store? Were you seeking something from your addiction that you did not believe you could get through a relationship with God? Guess what? You may have purchased an idol from a street peddler.

In the previous chapter we looked briefly at how we descended into addiction. We moved from friendship with the sinful activity to infatuation and from there to love and betrayal. Finally, the substance or activity that we had once used was now using us; it became the center of our lives, and without realizing, we had begun to worship it.

In this lesson, we will see if addiction is a form of idolatry.

Dr. Edward Welch describes idolatry as “anything on which we set our affections and indulge as an excessive and sinful attachment. Therefore, the idols that we can see – such as a bottle – are certainly not the whole problem. Idolatry includes anything we worship: the lust for

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pleasure, respect, love, power, control, or freedom from pain. ... The problem is not the idolatrous substance; it is the false worship of the heart.”¹

Dr. Welch provides us with an important connection between addiction and idolatry. Addictive substances, thoughts and activities promise you benefits that they do not deliver. They are false gods. The problem does not begin with the bottle of beer, the marijuana joint or the pornographic picture. The problem started in our heart where we sought a source for pleasure or a solution to a problem such as our need for love, power, control, or freedom from pain. So the addiction started with false worship in our heart. It was idolatry.

Dr. Welch wasn't the first person to consider idolatry something more than the worship of little statues. In the Bible, God spoke to Ezekiel and through the Apostle Paul about the same issue. Much later, in the sixteenth century, John Calvin described man's heart as an idol factory. Fallen man constantly seeks sinful solutions to his problems and constantly fabricates idols that promise to lead him out of the darkness of his current situations, whatever they may be.

In that sense, we have worshipped drugs, alcohol, sexual pleasure, people, power and money as the solution to some problem in our lives. All of these little idols fall down to one larger one in the life of an unbeliever. If you do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ, then the greatest idol in your life is ... you. Think about it. All addictions focus on providing some perceived benefit that you believe you need or deserve or simply crave. Addiction is all about self. Addicts of all makes and models routinely sacrifice the concerns of others in order to indulge themselves.

Let's look at a couple of scripture passages that provide a better understanding of addiction and idolatry.

And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true; and we are in him that is true, even his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. I John 5:20-21

Was John referring to little statues when he mentioned idols in this passage? Probably not. Look at the context of this verse. John was talking about the knowledge of God that He has given us, "... that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." Then he warns us to stay away from idols. Why? Idols cloud our understanding of the truth and interfere with our worship of God. An idol is anything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God or that interferes with our worship of Him.

¹ Welch, Dr. Edward, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, pg. 49

John's description of the problem with idols clearly relates to addictions. They cloud your understanding and take your eyes off of God. You could use the same language as John and say, "Little children, keep yourselves from addictive activities, thoughts and substances."

Do all idols have a physical form or can they be a habit or just a pattern of thinking? Take a look at what God tells Ezekiel about the priests who were left in Jerusalem during the early part of the Babylonian captivity.

Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their face. Should I be inquired of at all by them?

Ezekiel 14:3

God told Ezekiel that idols can be set up in the heart. They are not always physical, tangible things. You can harbor lust, pornography, memories of times when you were high on drugs and other thoughts in your mind. If you do, then just like the priests in Ezekiel, you are harboring idols in your heart. Your worship of these idols interferes with your relationship with God. On this basis, God says, "Should I be inquired of at all by them?" By continuing to indulge in worshipping the idol, you are separating yourself further and further from the Lord, and you are placing yourself at great risk of actively engaging in that old addiction.

The Apostle Paul uses the failures of the Old Testament Israelites to warn Christians not to fall into idolatry.

In I Corinthians 10:6-14, Paul sites four examples of failure that occurred during the wilderness period after the Israelites were delivered from Egypt. He uses these examples essentially to say "don't let this happen to you".

Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. 7 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." 8 Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; 9 nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; 10 nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way

of escape, that you may be able to bear it. 14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I Corinthians 10:6-14

First of all, Paul says that their failures were rooted in lust. They wanted something that they did not believe God was providing them. This is still the root cause of our failures too. Maybe you were hungering for fulfillment, joy, peace or excitement. Or maybe you were desperate to have someone love you. If Satan can convince you that God is not sufficient to meet your needs then he can trick you into a sinful solution of his or your own making. He scratches a lust that you harbor in your heart and it festers into full blown sin.

Paul lists four specific examples of their failure. Each one is instructive for us too.

1) In verse 7 he refers to their worship of the golden calf in the wilderness, “And do not become idolaters as were some of them”. Believing that Jehovah God had left them, they returned to the way of life that they had known in Egypt. They made a golden calf and worshipped it as god.

Sometimes you may be tempted to think that God doesn't care or that He isn't paying attention. At these moments, you may want to go back to your old way of life when you supposedly had everything under control. Like the Israelites, you have forgotten that you were actually in bondage in your old life. Stop and think. God has not forgotten you and He has not forsaken you. He has forgiven you. He loves you and He is in control, working all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

2) Verse 8 mentions their fall to sexual immorality with the Moabite women, “Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell.” The account in Numbers 25:1-18 tells us that this also led them into idolatry. Balaam knew how to get the Israelites to worship the false gods of Moab. He did it by tempting them to commit sexual immorality with the Moabite women. Once the Israelite men were in bed with them, they began to take on the Moabites' sinful way of life.

The same thing still happens today. If you fall to sexual immorality, Satan will begin to drag you into whatever lifestyle the other person is leading. He may also tell you to go ahead and sin it up, since you have already broke one commandment you might as well break them all. So he tempts, he condemns you for your failure, and he drags you into further sin.

3) Verse 9 refers to the time when the Israelites complained about God's provision for them in Numbers 21:5 "And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.'" Dissatisfied with God's provision, they complained against the very God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt! They had forgotten God's past deliverance, His protection from the Egyptian army, His provision of water from a rock, and they loathed the manna that He had rained down from heaven.

Our memory can be very selective and very poor too. If Satan can cause you to be dissatisfied with your current situation, then he can tempt you to seek deliverance from someone other than God. Dissatisfaction often comes when you compare your situation with someone else whom you believe has it much better. They may have more money or a bigger house or better health. When things have been tight financially, I have been tempted to complain when I saw people at church who had plenty of money and didn't seem to have a care in the world. The Holy Spirit chastised me by saying, "What are you lacking? You don't know what they are going through in their house. Just because they have plenty of money doesn't mean that they don't have any problems." The Lord knows that I would not trade the love and peace in my home for any amount of money. I am very thankful for my family and our living situation. Since the Lord corrected me on this point, I have not envied anyone's financial wealth.

4) Verse 10 refers to a time in Numbers 16 when Korah rebelled against God and complained that Moses had taken too much authority. As a result, God showed the people of Israel who He had appointed by destroying Korah, Dathan, Abiram and the princes of Israel who joined them in the rebellion. Rather than seeing this as God's corrective judgment, the people of Israel murmured even more against God's authority and Moses' authority. As a result, God brought a plague into the camp of the Israelites and fourteen thousand people lost their lives.

Rebellion against God's authority can cause people to seek solutions to their problems from other sources or to rebel against God in other ways. Some choose drugs, others alcohol, some get lost in porn or sexual perversion. Some just decide to grab the reins of power so they can control the events of their lives. All of these solutions are rooted in lust and rebellion, and they lead to destruction in the end.

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With these four examples in mind, Paul tells us to watch out, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (I Corinthians 10:13).

No one is immune to temptation. If you think that you are standing on your own, watch out, you may be in for a fall. When we are tempted, Paul encourages us to look for the way of escape that God alone provides. Note this, when you are tempted, God is for you. He is trying to show you a way of escape so that you will not fall into sin.

The last thing that Paul says is the most important one for us to remember, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” This is the clear solution to the problems Paul listed in the previous verses. Take Paul’s counsel. When you think that God has departed from you, or you are tempted to fall into sexual sin flee idolatry rather than giving in to it. When Satan, your enemy, tempts you to be dissatisfied with God’s provision or with His authority then flee idolatry rather than trying to create a god who will better meet your desires. Do not look for false gods that you believe will suit you better. Do not look to false gods for deliverance. Seek the face of God in prayer; pour out your heart to Him. False gods may promise love and acceptance or relief from the trouble but these are false promises that lead to addiction and destruction.

How can we recognize this problem and deal with it before temptations become sin and lead to idolatry?

Dr. Welch provides a description of the early and later stages of addiction that help us to recognize when idols in the making are disguised as seemingly little sins or indulgencies.

“In the early stages of addiction, we were in rebellion. Our heart desired just one more and our body was briefly satisfied. ... Then, in later stages, we were in bondage. Our idolatrous hearts wanted more but when we received it, our physical desires were not met and demanded more!”²

In the early stages, it’s like eating chocolate candy. One or two after a meal and your desire for sweets is satisfied. It’s a nice treat after a meal. No big deal. Right?

In a later stage you look for a chocolate or two after lunch and dinner. Suddenly, you are making sure that you always have a bag of chocolate around the house and you look for a handful after every meal. Without your “sweet treat” the meal is not complete and you are not satisfied.

² Ibid, Figure 3.2, pg. 52

Soon you are stopping for a mid-morning break ... and another one in the middle of the afternoon. Your little desire for a sweet treat has gotten out of control and it now controls you.

The “chocolate” analogy looks pretty lame compared to the type of addiction you have dealt with; however, the principles are probably the same. You started with a taste for something that provided a little pleasure and it led to taking a lot just to alleviate the pain. Soon the “sweet treat” had set up shop in the middle of your heart and demanded attention. It became an idol. Your sweet treat may have been drug use that started as a weekend retreat then became necessary to get you through every day. It may have been a phone call to a married friend of the opposite sex and it became an affair that you did not know how to get out of. Whatever it was, it was easier to stop in the early stage of rebellion than in the later stage of bondage and addiction.

The best advice is to nip the problem in the bud. If you garden, you know that small weeds are a lot easier to remove than big ones, that a little attention to the problem early on and every day will help you avoid having your beautiful garden destroyed when the weeds take over the place. Use the four issues in I Corinthians 10 as a starting point to take inventory in your heart. See if there is any seed of rebellion that you need to address. Are there any small weeds growing in your garden? Take the time to uproot them. You will be glad you did.

Does God really consider these sinful desires to be idolatry?

Idolatry is a pretty serious charge. To be guilty of idol worship means that you have forsaken Jesus Christ in order to get something you need or want from another god. Is coveting the same as idolatry? To covet means that you only desire these things in your heart. You haven't even taken action on them ... yet. I mean, is it really so bad to want love and acceptance from a woman you're not married to? Or to fantasize about things that God has not provided? What about all of those memories of drug use or drunkenness, are they really so bad? After all, isn't that better than actively using them? Does God really consider a little covetousness as idolatry?

What does the Bible say? In at least two scripture passages, God says that covetousness is a form of idolatry.

For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Ephesians 5:5

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5

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The Greek word translated “covetous” in Ephesians 5:5 means “desiring more, eager for gain.” So a person who is eager for personal gain is an idolater. This sounds like the problem that Korah and the boys had in Numbers 16. Watch out for this idol in your heart. When you are dissatisfied with your wife or your financial situation, you are being set up to fall to a false god that offers a better deal. In reality, you will eventually be in bondage.

The word translated as “covetous” in Colossians 3:5 means “avarice, greediness”. It is the same word used in Luke 12:15 when Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." In other words, life isn't about the stuff! When we get our eyes focused on the pleasures of this world, we become confused. We become dissatisfied with God and His provisions, and we seek to fulfill our covetous desires in some other way. According to Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 this is idolatry.

So you can see how subtly our wrong desires can lead to sin, rebellion, idolatry and bondage to addiction. This is true about illegal addictions like drugs as well as the ones that may not be illegal but are extremely harmful to us personally and against God's perfect will for our lives.

How can we avoid this problem?

First of all, Colossians 3:5 tells us that we are not to tame our lusts; we are supposed to put them to death, to separate ourselves from them. Doing drugs less often or smoking marijuana rather than crack isn't the answer. Don't let the enemy trick you into thinking that you can control your sin or that a little sin is okay. It isn't.

You need to understand the seriousness of the fight in order to have hope for victory. We are not just addressing principles of putting away addictions; we are here to put them to death.

Here is some Biblical counsel that will help you avoid idolatry and addiction.

1. Focus on the One we worship. Remember that Jesus Christ is sufficient to meet our needs in every situation. Focus on Christ. The solution to idolatry is to get our eyes back on Jesus.

In I Thessalonians 1:9, the believers in Thessalonica were commended because they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. They didn't just turn from idols. They turned towards God. Like the old hymn says, when you turn your eyes upon Jesus, the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

Remember Hebrews 12:1-2. The method and the motivation for successfully running the race is to fix your eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of your faith!

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2. Use the tools that God has provided for spiritual battle. All battles with idolatry are spiritual. The power behind these thoughts and substances belongs to Satan. He has created attractive alternatives to worshipping the one true God and we bowed to them in the past. How can we successfully fight the battle against idolatry? Use some Biblical tools:

Tool #1 Take thoughts captive. You cannot defeat spiritual enemies using earthly weapons. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

II Corinthians 10:3-5.

Tool #2 Submit to God. Submit yourselves therefore to God. (James 4:7) As sheep, we get in trouble when we wander away from the protection of the Good Shepherd. Rebellion from God will only bring sin and pain. There is great protection in living in submission to God.

Tool #3 Resist Satan. Resist the devil and he will flee (James 4:7). You can deal with the schemes of the enemy much easier by catching his tempting thoughts as they first enter your mind. “Get behind me, Satan. The Lord rebuke you. That thought is not from God.”

Tool #4 Pray. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. (James 4:8) This is a promise. When you move towards the Lord, He moves to you. Pray. God is listening.

Tool #5 Use the Word of God. In Luke 4:1-13 Jesus employed the Word of God when He was tempted by Satan. He went directly to scripture to resist the devil. You should do the same.

Tool #6 Put on the full armor of God. Study each aspect of the armor that is described in Ephesians 6:12-18.

- 1) Have your back (loins) covered with the truth of God; when you are honest, you don't have to cover your own back, Jesus will be your rear guard.

- 2) Wear the breastplate of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. His righteousness is perfect. It will guard your heart just like the breastplate protected the heart of the

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Roman soldiers in battle.

- 3) Walk in the good news of Jesus Christ. When you are walking in the Word then you are not prone to fall.
- 4) Uphold the shield of faith as you encounter the uncertainties of life. You will not understand all of life's twists and turns; you just need to trust that the Lord is controlling them. By doing so, you will eliminate the fear and anxiety that the enemy wants you to fall victim to.
- 5) Think on the things of God (wear the helmet of salvation). As Paul says in Philippians 4:8, 'Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things.'
- 6) Take the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Spend time reading God's Word and the Holy Spirit will put it to use at the appropriate time in your life. Reading the Bible will change your life. There is no substitute for regular Bible reading and study in this spiritual battle.
- 7) Above all else, pray, pray, pray. 'Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints' (Ephesians 6:18).
Wow, it looks like Paul pretty well covered our defense in these seven verses. Put them to work!

Josiah was one of the godliest kings to rule Judah. In II Kings 23:6, King Josiah removed the idol that had been erected in the temple, burned it, stamped it to powder and threw it in the graveyard. He did not leave anything that even symbolized that old idol. How should you act upon the idols in your heart?

The Apostle Paul addresses this question in the sixth chapter of II Corinthians:

And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you."
II Corinthians 6:16-17

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What is Paul directing you to do when he says, “touch not the unclean thing”? There are physical items that were part of your old addictions. Identify them and move them out of your life. Get rid of the bong pipes, the roach clips, needles, photos, magazines, beer signs and anything else that would lead to setting that idol back in your heart. And stay away from the places and people who are continuing in their addiction.

Paul says that you are the temple of the living God. So your call to purity in the temple of your body is the same as the call to purity in the Old Testament Temple. When you harbor idols in your heart, you are as guilty of sin as the priests mentioned in Ezekiel 14:3 who worshipped idols in God’s Temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, ask the Lord regularly to do a heart-cleaning so that the idolatrous thoughts cannot set up house again in your life. King David was called a man after God’s own heart. His desire expressed in Psalm 139:23-24 explains why:

Search me, Oh God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

We have covered a lot of scripture in this chapter. Hopefully, you see how seriously the Bible treats idolatry, and you understand that you had actually set up an idol in your heart when you were in addiction.

I pray that those days are past now and that you are living as a new creation in Christ Jesus. If you are still harboring any idols or if you are struggling with addiction, you need to know that God loves you and He wants to remove the idol so that you can experience the abundant life in Christ that He offers. Review the scripture passages in this chapter. Agree with the Lord that you have a problem and ask Him to take it from you. Focus your eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of your faith. Then actively be on guard to make sure that you are not making any new idols in your life. Finally, invite God daily to search your heart to see if there is any wicked way in you and ask Him to lead you in the way that is everlasting.

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Free to Live a New Life In Christ



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Assignment 3

Name: _____

1. After reading this lesson, do you think that you have ever purchased an idol from a vendor on the street? _____ Can you identify any idols in your past that you looked to for something that you thought God could not provide? _____ What were they? _____

2. What is an idol? (Re-read pages 1-2 in the lesson.) _____

3. On page 2, there is a quote from Dr. Edward Welch that says, "Idolatry includes anything we worship: the lust for pleasure, respect, love, power, control, or freedom from pain. ... The problem is not the idolatrous substance; it is the false worship of the heart." Can you identify any idolatrous thoughts that you may still be worshipping in your heart and mind? _____ If so, what are they? _____

4. In I Corinthians 10:6-14 Paul lists four examples of failure that resulted from idolatry when the Israelites were traveling through the wilderness. Briefly list those four examples:

- 1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
4) _____

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5. Paul concludes his statement in I Corinthians 10:6-14 by saying, “Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” How can you take Paul’s warning to heart as you look at the four ways that the Israelites failed in the wilderness? _____

6. The Bible continuously warns us against covetousness and lust. Does the Bible really consider those sinful desires to be idolatry? _____ Read the scripture passages quoted on page 13 and tell me how a little dissatisfaction with circumstances in your life can lead to idolatry. _____

7. Tell me how you can avoid this problem of coveting and idolatry. _____

8. As you pray Psalm 139:23-24, are there any specific thoughts that you believe the Lord is asking you to bring into subjection to Him? _____ If so, keep giving them up to the Lord. Confess weakness in this area of your life and ask the Holy Spirit for help in overcoming these problems.

9. What is the most meaningful thing you learned from this lesson? _____

Once you complete this worksheet, mail it to your group leader or send it to:

Free In Christ Prison Ministries
PO Box 1492
Yanceyville, NC 27379

We will review your answers and return this sheet to you along with the next lesson.
Study the Foundational verses included in this chapter and continue to allow the Lord to transform you by the renewing of your mind. People are praying for you!