

At first sight, Israel's addiction to idolatry seems incomprehensible—the epitome of foolishness. But as we begin to investigate further and begin to see its various expressions, the whole subject becomes uncomfortably close to our own experience.

Idolatry is worshiping created things rather than the Creator. Given that definition, we have to realize it comes in many forms and that we are as vulnerable to it today as people were 3,000 years ago.

10. The following scriptures give us examples of various forms of idolatry. Identify the idol in each case—and its 21st-century equivalent. What was the attraction?

GENESIS 3:4–5

⁴“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

2 KINGS 17:15

They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, “Do not do as they do,” and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

JEREMIAH 22:14–17

¹⁴“He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.’ So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red.

¹⁵“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.” ¹⁶He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD. ¹⁷“But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.”

EZEKIEL 28:1–8

The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“‘In the pride of your heart you say, “I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.” But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god. ³Are you wiser than Daniel? Is no secret hidden from you? ⁴By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. ⁵By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.

“The pastoral vocation [clergy] in America is embarrassingly banal. It is banal because it is pursued under the canons of job efficiency and career management. It is banal because it is reduced to the dimensions of a job description. It is banal because it is an idol—a call from God exchanged for an offer by the devil for work that can be measured and manipulated at the convenience of the worker. Holiness is not banal. Holiness is blazing.”

Eugene Peterson

“There are four classes of Idols which beset men's minds. To these for distinction's sake I have assigned names—calling the first class, Idols of the Tribe; the second, Idols of the Cave; the third, Idols of the Market-Place; the fourth, Idols of the Theatre.”

Francis Bacon

“Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
 “Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god, I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendor. They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas.’”

MARK 7:7–13

“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

⁹And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ ¹¹But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹²then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

JOHN 5:44

How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

JOHN 11:47–48

⁴⁷Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

JOHN 12:42–43

⁴²Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

PHILIPPIANS 3:17–19

¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

*“And the people bowed and prayed,
 to the neon god they made.”
 Simon and Garfunkel,
 “The Sounds Of Silence”*

*“Whom have you idolized? Or
 whom have you loved and adored
 excessively? When does admiration
 become excessive—become
 idolatry?”*

*“Anyone with a hierarchy of
 values has placed **something** at its
 apex, and whatever that is is the
 god he serves. The Old Testament
 and New Testament call such
 gods idols...the systems that give
 them allegiance are religions.”
 Herb Schlossberg*

*“...for they themselves report
 what kind of reception you gave
 us. They tell how you turned to
 God from idols to serve the living
 and true God...”
 1 Thessalonians 1:9*

among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. ¹⁵It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. ¹⁶Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." ¹⁷From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." ¹⁸They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. ¹⁹No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" ²⁰He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

JEREMIAH 18:11–12

¹¹"Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.' ¹²But they will reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

EZEKIEL 8:9–13

⁹And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here." ¹⁰So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. ¹¹In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising.

¹²He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'" ¹³Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."



For more on the idols that seduce us today, see Section 6 of Module 6.

Why couldn't these ordinary people realize how foolish their actions were? Why did no one "stop to think"?

"The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable."

John Piper

11.1 Why did idolatry persist in these situations?

11.2 Do you detect any of these attitudes in yourself? How are they expressed?

12. What are the effects of idolatry on a person who aspires to follow Christ? Consider the following.

MATTHEW 6:21–24

²¹“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

MARK 4:18–19

¹⁸“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:18–22

¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons. ²²Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 JOHN 2:15–17 (THE MESSAGE)

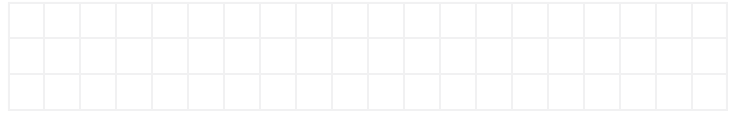
¹⁵Don’t love the world’s ways. Don’t love the world’s goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. ¹⁶Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. ¹⁷The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.

“There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets ‘things’ with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns ‘my’ and ‘mine’ look innocent enough in print, but their constant and universal use is significant. They express the real nature of the old Adamic man better than a thousand volumes of theology could do. They are the verbal symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. Things have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. God’s gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.”

A.W. Tozer

1 PETER 2:11

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.



12.1 Summarize your observations:

As you reflect on the subject of idolatry, to which idols are you most susceptible?

Four horizontal lines for writing a response to the question about susceptibility to idols.

What risks do we run when we allow idols to remain in our lives?

Four horizontal lines for writing a response to the question about risks of idols.

What is the solution to our idolatrous tendencies?

Four horizontal lines for writing a response to the question about solutions to idolatry.

Idolatry is still with us in many forms. Our working definition of idolatry, from Romans 1:25, is *to serve or worship created things, rather than the Creator*.

In business it is necessary to trust a wide variety of things. We trust our abilities, our experience, our partners, our position or the company itself. Resources such as these are necessary to do our work. Is it possible that such assets could become idols? When would we cross the line, in relating to them?

12.2 What helps you keep God as the focus of your trust?

Seven horizontal lines for writing a response to the question about keeping God as the focus of trust.