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ZONDERVAN

*Gods at War*

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# introduction

It was just a simple, late-night conversation with my eight-year-old daughter Morgan. But it changed my life and my church.

I was sitting on her bed for our nightly prayers. But she had a surprise for me before we prayed. She had been doing some memory work, and she wanted to recite it for me.

“Dad,” she said, “do you want to hear me say the Ten Commandments?!”

“You memorized them all?”

A proud grin came over her face.

“Wow,” I said, smiling. “Let’s hear them.”

I lay down next to her and listened as Morgan worked her way through the greatest top-ten list of them all, the one that came in tablet form and was recorded in Exodus 20.

She made her way through them in her singsong way: “You shall have no other gods before me . . . You shall not make for yourself an idol . . .”

On down the list. As she finished, my “teachable moment” instincts kicked in. I said, “Morgan, that was great! Let me ask you, have you ever broken any of the commandments?”

She smiled again. This time it wasn’t as much a shy smile as a guilty one. Like the smile I give my wife when she asks what happened to the Sour Patch Watermelons that were meant for the kids’ lunch boxes. I could see that Morgan was trying to think through

an answer that would be honest without indicting her. I decided to help.

“Well let’s see,” I said, rubbing my chin. “Have you ever lied?”

She nodded slowly.

“Have you ever wanted what someone else had so much that you wished they didn’t have it?” She nodded, discovering that she was guilty of coveting.

I kept pushing. “I know you haven’t murdered anybody, Morgan. But have you ever felt really, *really* angry at someone in your heart? Maybe so much that — just for then — you *hated* that person?”

“Morgan, have you ever, maybe . . . oh I don’t know . . . not honored your father and mother?”

We both knew the answer to that one.

This was not going the way she planned. But hey, that’s how it goes when you get stuck with a preacher for a daddy. She let out a heavy sigh, which I immediately recognized. It’s the same sigh I get on a Sunday morning when someone is losing interest in the sermon. It was time for me to stop preaching and offer the invitation.

Before I had a chance, her eyes became bright and she said, “Dad, I know one commandment I have never broken! I’ve never made an idol.”

Now, I really, *really* wanted to respond to that!

I wanted to tell my daughter that, as a matter of fact, that particular commandment is the very one we *all* break most often.

I wanted to tell her what Martin Luther said — that you can’t violate the other nine without breaking this one first. But as I lay next to my young daughter, I decided it best to save the theology lesson for another day. We prayed and thanked God for sending Jesus to take away our sin and guilt. As I left, I gave her a smile and a kiss on the forehead, and told her I was proud of her for memorizing the Ten Commandments.

But walking down the steps, I wondered how many people see this subject of idolatry exactly as Morgan did. Maybe they see the Ten Commandments as one more checklist, like the rules posted at the community swimming pool — no running by the pool, no diving in the shallow areas, no peeing in the pool. Just a long list of rules. And the one about idols is quickly skipped over because they think they've got that bullet point covered.

After all, the whole subject of idolatry seems mostly obsolete. That command was for then, not now. Right?

As for those thousand or so references to idolatry in the Bible, haven't they expired? We don't know anyone who kneels before golden statues or bows down before carved images. Hasn't idolatry gone the way of leisure suits, shoulder pads, and jelly shoes? Aren't we past all that?

Idolatry seems so primitive. So irrelevant. Is a book on idolatry even necessary? Why not a book about rain dancing and witch doctors?

And yet idolatry is the number one issue in the Bible, and that should raise caution signals for us. Idolatry comes into every book. More than fifty of the laws in the first five books are aimed at this issue. In all of Judaism, it was one of only four sins to which the death penalty was attached.

Seeing my faith and life through the lens of idolatry has rebuilt my relationship with God from the ground up. As we've talked more about it, many in our church would say the same. Understanding the significance of this issue was a game changer.

As we look at life through this lens, it becomes clear that there's a war going on. The gods are at war, and their strength is not to be underestimated. These gods clash for the throne of your heart, and much is at stake. Everything about me, everything I do, every relationship I have, everything I hope or dream or wish to become, depends upon what god wins that war.

The deadliest war is the one most of us never realize is being

fought. I understood how my eight-year-old daughter had yet to get a handle on that commandment, but the problem is that most adults haven't done so either. I wonder how many of the rest of us are just where Morgan was, believing they can put a nice checkmark onto that list and dismiss any concern over idols forever.

What if it's not about statues? What if the gods of here and now are not cosmic deities with strange names? What if they take identities that are so ordinary that we don't recognize them as gods at all? What if we do our "kneeling" and our "bowing" with our imaginations, our checkbooks, our search engines, our calendars?

What if I told you that every sin you are struggling with, every discouragement you are dealing with, even the lack of purpose you're living with are because of idolatry?

part 1

# gods at war

# idolatry is the issue

*Idolatry is huge in the Bible,  
dominant in our personal lives,  
and irrelevant in our mistaken estimations.*

— Os Guinness

Imagine a man who has been coughing constantly. This cough keeps him up half of the night and interrupts any conversation he has that lasts more than a minute or two. The cough is so unrelenting that he goes to the doctor.

The doctor runs his tests.

Lung cancer.

Now imagine the doctor knows how tough the news will be to handle. So he doesn't tell his patient about cancer. Instead, he writes a prescription for some strong cough medicine and tells him that he should be feeling better soon. The man is delighted with this prognosis. And sure enough, he sleeps much better that night. The cough syrup seems to have solved his problem.

Meanwhile, very quietly, the cancer is eating away at his body.

As a teacher and church leader, I talk to people every week who are ~~coughing~~.

Struggling.

Hurting.

Stressing.

Cheating.

Lusting.

Spending.

Worrying.

Quitting.

Medicating.

Avoiding.

Searching.

They come to me and share their struggles.

They unload their frustrations.

They express their discouragement. They display their wounds.

They confess their sins.

When I talk to people, they point to what they believe is the problem. In their minds, they've nailed it. They can't stop coughing. But here's what I've discovered: they're talking about a symptom rather than the true illness — the true issue — which is always idolatry.

### **CASE STUDY 1: It's Not about the Money**

When I arrive at the office, I see that he's already there, sitting outside my door. I bet he's been there for fifteen minutes. I size him up as the kind of man who has never been late to an appointment in his life.

His clothing and shoes appear to be above my scale. It occurs to me that I should be the one waiting on him, maybe for some kind of high-level business advice. I smile to myself knowing that he's probably thinking the same thing. Still, there is something about him that doesn't match his carefully put together look. What is it that doesn't fit?

*There.* It's in his eyes. There is deep worry in them, not the easy confidence of the business achiever.

I show him to a seat in my office. He skips the chitchat and gets right to the subject. It's easy to see he's a no-nonsense, get-to-it kind of guy.

“I’m worried about my family,” he says with a deep sigh.

“Your family? Is that why you’re here?”

“Well, no. It’s about me, of course. I just worry about what I’ve done to them. Their future. Our name.”

His story is short and not so sweet. The IRS has caught him cheating on his taxes, on a serious scale. He enumerates the various charges he’s facing, and I don’t even understand all of them. It’s clear that he does, however. And it’s clear that, at the very least, he will devote much of the rest of his life to making good on the financial penalties that are soon to be imposed.

I’m not sure what to tell him. He seems to understand the gravity of his situation. I certainly don’t give legal advice. But I can see that it’s not just about getting caught; it’s more about coming to grips with what he has done.

We sit without speaking for a moment, and finally he looks up and says, “The thing I come back to over and over — and can’t get an answer to — is why.”

“You mean other than financial gain?”

He chuckles drily. “Financial gain? Kyle, I didn’t *need* the money. I didn’t need a penny of it; I’m a millionaire several times over. I could have gone to my accountants, paid my taxes right down the line, given away plenty more, and still lived the same comfortable life and never known the difference. Whatever I really owed the government? I wouldn’t have missed it.”

That’s a world I don’t live in, but I smile and nod, pretending to understand. “Okay. So if not for financial gain, then what’s your best ‘why’ theory?”

His eyes meet mine before wandering to the window. The sun shines on his face, and I can see the slightest hint of wetness in those eyes.

“That’s what I’m saying, Kyle. I don’t know. I really don’t get it. It’s ridiculously stupid, and I don’t do stupid things. Not with money or anything else. And listen —” He darts a quick look

at me. “I know I’m a sinner. I get that. I have no problem calling this what it is: sin. *Ugly* sin. But why *this* sin? Why a sin so unnecessary?”

We talk about it. We talk about his life, his family, his upbringing, and the things that have influenced him. What I want him to see is that sin doesn’t just spring up out of nowhere. It usually grows where some kind of seed has been planted.

We need to dig beneath the soil a bit.

“You said the money was unnecessary,” I say. “But money, as a rule, has been pretty important for you. Would you agree?”

“Sure. Obviously.”

“Important enough that you might describe it as your main motivation, as your master goal?”

He thinks about it. “Yeah. That’s fair.”

“As a god?”

For a moment he doesn’t understand the question. Then he exhales slowly. I see the answer written across his face.

“It wasn’t always like that,” he says.

“No, it never is, in the beginning. Goals can become gods. You start to serve them, live for them, and sacrifice for them. In the beginning, it was about your money serving you. But at some point, do you think you switched roles?”

“I never thought about it like that.”

## **CASE STUDY 2: No Big Deal**

She’s a young woman who grew up in our church. Her family wants me to meet and talk with her. They’re concerned because she’s about to move in with her boyfriend, who isn’t a Christian. This ought to be a fun one.

I call her twice and leave messages, but she doesn’t return my call. The third time she picks up. She knows why I’m calling and tries to laugh it off.

“I can’t believe my parents are making such a big deal out of this,” she says with a nervous laugh. I can picture her rolling her eyes. In her mind this whole thing is a mild cough and nothing to worry about.

“Well, I appreciate your talking to me for a few minutes. But I have to ask, do you think it’s possible that you’ve got this backward?”

“What do you mean?”

“That instead of making a big deal out of nothing, it could be that you’re making nothing out of a big deal?”

More nervous laughter. “It’s not a big deal,” she says again.

“Do you mind my telling you why I think it is?”

She sighs deeply and proceeds to give me her prediction of all the reasons she thinks I’ll produce.

I interrupt her with a question. “Have you thought about how much moving in together is going to cost you?”

“You mean the cost of the apartment?”

“No, I’m not necessarily talking about money. I mean the way your family feels about it, and the pressure you’re getting from them. That’s a kind of price, right?”

“Yeah, I guess it is, but that’s their problem.”

“And what is this going to cost your future marriage?”

“I don’t even know if we’re going to get married,” she responds.

“I’m not necessarily talking about your getting married to him, because statistically speaking, you most likely won’t.”

She understands what I’m getting at, but I push it a bit farther. “How much is this going to cost your future husband? What price will he have to pay for this decision?” She has to stop and consider that one.

I continue to count the ways that this decision is a big deal, because it’s costing her more than she knows.

“So here’s what I suggest. If you’re willing to pay a price, then

this must be pretty important to you. It must be a fairly big deal if you're willing to go through all of this."

I take her silence for reflection, and I finally get to my point. "When I see the sacrifices you are willing to make, and the fact that you are willing to ignore what God has to say about all this, it seems to me that you've turned this relationship into a god."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A god is what we sacrifice for and what we pursue. From where I sit, you have the Lord God on one side saying one thing, and your boyfriend on the other side saying something else. And you're choosing your boyfriend over God. The Bible calls that idolatry, and it's actually a pretty big deal."

No nervous laughter this time. She confesses, "I've never thought about it like that."

### **CASE STUDY 3: The Secret Struggle**

He comes in maybe five or ten minutes late.

He had asked if we could talk for a few minutes, and I suggested meeting for coffee. But he wanted to meet someplace "a little more private." So we set my office as the location.

He arrives and pauses in the doorway, as if still not sure he wants to keep this appointment.

"Come on in." I smile and motion toward a seat.

He answers my smile with a very brief one. He sits, and his body language is all about reluctance. He wraps his arms one around another, lightly massaging his right elbow. I guess he's about my age, midthirties, an ordinary guy. He hasn't told me what this meeting is about, but I know. The conversation I'm about to have has become very familiar.

I ask him a few mundane questions about his work, where he's from, anything to break the ice and create a more relaxed setting. When we've done that for a couple of minutes, he finally broaches

his subject. I can tell it takes all the courage he can summon to release his long-held secret.

“I ... um ... I think I’m addicted to pornography, or something,” he stammers.

He looks at his shoes.

“Okay. Well you’re not the first person to walk in here and sit in that seat and say those words. How long has this been a struggle?”

He tells his story, starting when he was twelve years old and saw certain images with the guys — in magazines smuggled in from somebody’s dad’s closet. Pictures that disturbed him at first. Pictures that lodged in his mind, that wouldn’t go away, that started calling to him. Pictures he can perfectly visualize all these years later.

He talks about his hatred of the internet. He describes the web as if it were his mortal enemy.

“In the old days, people had to go to those stores,” he says. “Ugly stores with the windows all painted over. Cheap, seedy places. I never had the courage to go into one of those stores.”

“But the internet is anonymous.”

“Exactly,” he says. “It’s so easy. Any kind of picture, any kind of video is at your fingertips. Just like that. Instant gratification, whenever you feel the slightest urge.”

He speaks with the weary tones of a twenty-year slave, of a prisoner who has given up on escape plans.

“What am I supposed to do,” he says, “unplug the computer? I’m dependent on the internet like everyone else. I need it for work. I need it for everything. Even if I just used a phone, you can pull up those images there. Turn on the television, and there are a million suggestions. Am I supposed to just watch the Disney Channel?”

He says he had no idea what pornography would do to his life, particularly his relationships. He seems to understand, at least to some degree, how it has changed the way he views and interacts with women.

“Thing is,” he said, “you come to see it’s just an itch. That’s all. An itch. But it never goes away, and you have to scratch. Well, you have to scratch harder and deeper as time goes by. You know what I mean?”

“I know.”

There is silence. I’m sure he’s expecting me to give the same advice he has heard for so many years: Put a filter on your internet browser. Join a support group. Find an accountability partner. Redirect your eyes. All helpful suggestions, but I know he’s tried them all multiple times; otherwise he wouldn’t be sitting in front of me.

What I know is that there is an idol that must be dethroned, and until that happens he will suffer. He’ll enjoy no intimacy in relationships. He’ll struggle to have any real connection with God.

“You think what you have is a lust problem, but what you really have is a worship problem. The question you have to answer each day is, Will I worship God or will I worship sex?”

He doesn’t verbalize it, but the expression on his face says, “I’ve never thought about it like that.”

## What Lies Beneath

Idolatry isn’t just one of many sins; rather it’s the one great sin that all others come from. So if you start scratching at whatever struggle you’re dealing with, eventually you’ll find that underneath it is a false god. Until that god is dethroned, and the Lord God takes his rightful place, you will not have victory.

Idolatry isn’t *an* issue; it is *the* issue. All roads lead to the dusty, overlooked concept of false gods. Deal with life on the glossy outer layers, and you might never see it; scratch a little beneath the surface, and you begin to see that it’s always there, under some other coat of paint. There are a hundred million different symptoms, but the issue is always idolatry.

That's why, when Moses stood on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments from God, the first one was, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2 – 3).

When God issued this command during the time of Moses, the people were familiar with a lot of other gods. God's people had spent more than four hundred years in Egypt as slaves. Egypt was crowded with gods. They had taken over the neighborhood — literally. The Egyptians had local gods for every district. Egypt was the Baskin-Robbins of gods. You could pick and choose the flavors you wanted.

The Bible's paradigm is different. When we hear God say, "You will have no other gods before me," we think of it as a hierarchy: God is always in first place. But there are no places. God isn't interested in competing against others or being first among many.

God will not be part of any hierarchy.

He wasn't saying "before me" as in "ahead of me." A better understanding of the Hebrew word translated "before me" is "in my presence."

God declines to sit atop an organizational flowchart. He *is* the organization. He is not interested in being president of the board. He *is* the board. And life doesn't work until everyone else sitting around the table in the boardroom of your heart is fired. He is God, and there are no other applicants for that position. There are no partial gods, no honorary gods, no interim gods, no assistants to the regional gods.

God is saying this not because he is insecure but because it's the way of truth in this universe, which is his creation. Only one God owns and operates it. Only one God designed it, and only one God knows how it works. He is the only God who can help us, direct us, satisfy us, save us.

As we read Exodus 20, we see that the one true God has had it with the imitation and substitute gods. So God tells the nation of

Israel to break up the pantheon; send it home. All other god activity is cancelled. He makes sure the people understand that he is the one and only. He is the Lord God.

You may be thinking, Thanks for the history lesson, but that was a long time ago. After all, in our time, the problem doesn't appear to be that people worship *many* gods; it's that they don't worship *any* god.

Yet my guess is that the list of our gods is longer than theirs. Just because we call them by different names doesn't change what they are. We may not have the god of commerce, the god of agriculture, the god of sex, or the god of the hunt. But we do have portfolios, automobiles, adult entertainment, and sports. If it walks like an idol, and quacks like an idol ...

You can call it a cough instead of calling it cancer, but that doesn't make it any less deadly.

## **Idol Makeover**

One of our problems in identifying the gods is that their identities not only lack the usual trappings of religion; they are also things that often aren't even wrong. Is God against pleasure? Sex? Money? Power?

These things are not immoral but amoral; they are morally neutral until they are not. You could be serving something that is, in itself, very commendable. It could be family or career. It could be a worthy cause. You could even be feeding the hungry and healing the sick. All of those are good things.

The problem is that the instant something takes the place of God, the moment it becomes an end in itself rather than something to lay at God's throne, it becomes an idol. When someone or something replaces the Lord God in the position of glory in our lives, then that person or thing by definition has become our god.

So to identify some gods, look at what you pursue. Another

way to identify the gods at war in your life is to look at what you create.

Remember your commandments.

First: no other gods.

Second: no *making* other gods to worship.

The profound wisdom of that second commandment is that anything in the world can be hammered into an idol, and therefore can be a false god, if misplaced at the top spot of our affections. It's DIY idolatry: choose from our handy assortment of gods, mix and match, create your own.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the people waiting below whined because it was taking so long. Moses had left his brother, Aaron, in charge, and the people began clamoring for a god to lead them. They gathered everyone's gold, put it on the fire, and made a golden calf to worship. A little bit ironic, don't you think? The very moment God was telling Moses about having no other gods before him, the people were down below rigging up a god.

From later in the Bible, here is a reflection on what these people did: "The people made a calf at Mount Sinai; they bowed before an image made of gold. They traded their glorious God for a statue of a grass-eating bull" (Ps. 106:19 – 20 NLT).

That's not a good trade. They traded the Creator God for a god of their own creation.

Are we really any different? We replace God with statues of our own creation.

A house that we constantly upgrade.

A promotion that comes with a corner office.

Acceptance into the fraternity or sorority.

A team that wins the championship.

A body that is toned and fit.

We work hard at molding and creating our golden calves.

I already hear what you're thinking.

“You could say that about anything. You could take any issue, anything someone devoted anything to, and make it out to be idolatry.”

Exactly.

Anything at all can become an idol once it becomes a substitute for God in our lives.

To describe the concept more clearly, anything that becomes the purpose or driving force of your life probably points back to idolatry of some kind. Think about what you have pursued and created, and ask yourself, Why?

If you have a food addiction, why?

If you have “hot button” issues that tend to get you upset, why?

If you plan to go shopping this weekend even though you are drowning in debt, why?

If you spend countless hours fixing up the car and redecorating the house, why?

To think of these things as forms of idolatry, we need to use new imagery. Discard the idea of golden cows and multi-armed figurines. Even, just for a moment, strip away the whole idea of idolatry as an item on a ten-point list of don'ts.

This next exercise may seem a bit weird, but stick with me. I want you to reimagine idolatry as a tree.

See it in your mind: one of those great oak trees that seem older than time itself, one with impressive branches reaching out in every direction, branches growing from branches. And when erosion sets in, down the bank or beside the waters, you can see just how deep and far flung its roots are.

Imagine this tree of idolatry with many branches, each with something tied to it.

From one of the branches dangles a pot of gold.

Another branch grows food of all kinds; every delicious food imaginable seems to sprout from a different section of that branch.

Another branch widens into a flat, round ending, and when

you move closer, you can see that it is really a mirror that shows an idealized reflection of yourself.

Yet another branch is carved with beautiful craftsmanship. You follow its sinuous lines and realize it is the image of two human figures, entwined in a sensuous embrace.

One branch has, as fruit, different sets of keys — one set to a luxury car, another to a beach house in Florida.

Quite a peculiar tree. It has many other branches, each one with a curious item attached to it.

Here's the point: idolatry is the tree from which our sins and struggles grow.

Idolatry is always the issue. It's the trunk of the tree, and all other problems are just branches.

## the battleground of the gods

Sometimes very large companies make very bad mistakes.

Remember America Online?\* A few years ago, America Online released, to the public, the internet search history of 650,000 of its network users. The company was trying to demonstrate its vast reach among consumers.

An individual's search history meant that if he typed "NFL football scores" into a browser window, it was now a matter of public record.

Already you're saying, "What were they thinking?" But the fact is, AOL had taken certain precautions. No real names were used — only user numbers. So it wasn't Bob down the street, but an anonymous "User #545354," who was checking to see how the Green Bay Packers did.

The problem was that the precautions weren't strong enough. The *New York Times* quickly demonstrated how it was possible to select a user number and put a name to it.

How could they do that? Let's say User #545354 searched for "transmission problems 2002 Chevy Camaro." This wouldn't tell us much on its own, but they also revealed thousands of other

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\*True story: At one point more than 50 percent of the CDs produced worldwide were AOL free software CDs. We collected enough to play Frisbee golf with them when I was in high school.

searches by the same user.\* Given enough information it wasn't too difficult to look at the searches and match them up to a specific user.

As you can guess, people didn't simply search for car information or sports scores. They also searched for silly things. Sad things. And many, many truly disturbing things.<sup>1</sup> Each user's "data trail" drew an unflinching picture of that person.

You could say we are defined by our searches.

What would your data trail say about you?

Where does the search you are on lead?

What you are searching for and chasing after reveals the god that is winning the war in your heart. Think of your heart as the battleground of the gods. Your heart is Bunker Hill, where the gods gather and wage war. Whatever god wins the day claims the throne of your heart.

### THE SEARCH CONTINUES

Google and several other internet companies track the most searched keywords from day to day, month to month, and year to year. Advertisers, political consultants, and culture watchers pay close attention to what the world is seeking.

At the end of 2011, *Sex* and *video* each logged 338 million searches per month.

*Porn*: 277 million.

Products and celebrities such as *iPad* or *Lady Gaga* often shoot to the top for short durations.

During a typical period, the singer Justin Bieber was the subject of more searches than God, at more than 30 million searches for Bieber to 20 million for God.\*

\* [www.webupon.com](http://www.webupon.com)

\*Likely searches for a Camaro driver: Metallica, mullet, midlife crisis.

Since I can't check your search history, I want you to examine your heart to find out where your allegiance lies and where your glory goes. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23). Your heart defines and determines who you are, how you think, and what you do. Because everything flows from it, your heart is the frontline for the gods at war.

What do we mean when we speak of "the heart"? In science, we know that it's the blood-pumping organ that makes the body run. It doesn't think; it doesn't feel. But in Hebrew culture, the heart was seen differently. It was a metaphor for the center or core of a personality. It was the spiritual hub, and your life flowed from its orientation. The ancients knew that you could lightly touch the wrist and feel a soft beating — what we call a pulse. That same pulse could be felt in the neck and elsewhere. But place the hand over the heart, which is the center of a person, and that beating was more powerful. It stood to reason that everything flowed from the heart — to the Hebrew, not only blood but personality, motives, emotions, and will.

These days, we tend to neatly divide the things that make us human. There's mind over here, body over there — physical and intellectual. But we know better. Science has helped us see that it's all interconnected. Your physical condition affects the way you think and feel; your "spirits" affect your physical health. We have come to see personality more holistically during the last century.

The Hebrews understood that all along. They spoke of loving God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, but they actually understood life as a unified thing — and they spoke of that unity as "the heart." In Hebrew, that word means "the kernel of the nut." Your "heart" reflects your true identity.

Here's an example of the Hebrew idea: "As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart" (Prov. 27:19). The heart is the truth of your identity, that's why the gods fight so fiercely for every inch of it.

## **The Source**

So let's think about your heart, and we'll do it by imagining a scenario. You're out for a hike on a beautiful spring day. You're delighted to hear running water, and sure enough, you come to a creek. But there's something wrong with this picture. You notice that someone has dumped trash into the stream — an ugly sight. There is refuse floating on the water. Judging by some of the empty soda cans, the trash has been there awhile.\* And there is an ugly film on the top of the water.

You can't just leave the scene as you found it, because it would bother your conscience. So you stoop down and begin gathering the trash.

It actually takes several hours before you can begin to see a difference; it's amazing how much junk is there. You sit back, rest for a moment, and realize you'll have to keep returning each day until the site is truly clean. Well, that's okay; it's a project you'll be proud of.

Except that when you come back the next day, it's as if your work has been undone.

In fact there's more trash than before. Somehow the garbage bred overnight. You think about the unlikelihood of someone coming to this very spot to dump their garbage in the few hours while you were away, and you realize that something smells fishy — so to speak. So you begin to follow the creek upstream.

Sure enough, you come to a garbage dump that has been there for years. It's emptying into the passing creek. Your cleaning job only opened up a gap for more stuff to settle. You could go and clean every day, but it would just be like pushing a boulder up the hill and watching it roll back down again. Which is surprisingly fun, but, really, what's the point?

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\*Crystal Pepsi and Apple Slice, thanks for the memories. It's not the same without you.

If you want your creek to be clean, that means going directly to the source and dealing with what's there.

Think of your heart, as the Hebrews did, as the source from which your life flows — thoughts, emotions, actions.

How much of your life do you spend dealing with the visible garbage rather than what produces it? We all spend great amounts of time, money, energy, and frustration doing trash removal when something upstream is still dumping into the flow. Even the church focuses downstream too much. It's so much easier to pick up a little bit of trash. Dealing with what's upstream is a staggering commitment. But the gods know the heart is the battlefield. It's where the war is won.

Overlooking the heart and focusing just on what's downstream could be described as “behavior modification.” Behavior modification, popularized in mid-twentieth century psychology, is the idea of trying to bring about change by targeting observable and measurable actions. It's symptom-based care, quick-fix methodology.

Here are some examples of how we do trash removal:

- If you have a gambling problem, then stay away from the casino and make it harder to access your accounts.
- If you have an anger problem, then take a deep breath and count to ten.
- If your marriage is in trouble, then schedule some date nights and buy your spouse a gift.
- If you're drowning in debt, then cut up your credit cards.
- If your weight has spiraled out of control, then join a gym and get on a diet.

This is not a condemnation of dieting or nice gifts or cutting up credit cards. All of these things can be positive actions, just as cleaning up the downstream trash is something that must be done. It's simply that the heart of the issue is an issue of the heart.

## **Walk Upstream**

So would you take a few minutes and consider your life? Get past trash removal for a moment and hike upstream to the heart of the problem.

Perhaps there has been a lot of anxiety in your life lately. If you and I were to talk, you might say, “I love the Lord. I don’t have any issues with idolatry. My problem is that I just tend to worry too much. I become very anxious.”

Okay, but hike upstream. What is it in your heart that is causing all that worry? It could be that if you stopped and examined your heart deeply enough, you would find a deep need to be in control of things. You like every *i* to be dotted, every *t* to be crossed. A place for everything and everything in its place.\* You don’t like surprises, and you simply want life to go according to script.

No law against any of that, right? As a matter of fact, employers love people like you. They would describe you as highly responsible — someone good with details. But still, you don’t enjoy the restless nights, the way the wheels just keep turning in your mind, the fact that you feel no real peace.

The need for control is a relentless god that has taken ground in your heart. In fact the more control you crave, the more that craving will control you, thus making control your god.

Because gods at times form dark alliances of cooperation with each other, maybe the god of control is working with the god of comfort, because yes, your need to cover every detail speaks of a drive to stay as snug within your comfort zone as possible. And so you think the issue is anxiety, while perhaps the real issue is that the gods of control and comfort are winning the war for your heart.

And these gods want to take your life in a much different

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\*Unnecessary and pointless footnotes are irritating. Couldn’t agree more.

direction than the Lord God. God is often calling us outside our comfort zones. He's calling us to a great adventure that requires risk and faith. The invitation of Jesus is to take up a cross and follow him. It's hard to carry a cross when comfort is your god. The gods of control and comfort are likely in direct conflict with the Lord God who has called you to a new kind of life.

Let's try another example. What if you come to me and tell me that you are a workaholic? "That's my problem, plain and simple," you say. "I'm a workaholic. How can I stop being one?"

My first impulse is to do some trash removal, so I tell you to pursue the discipline of going home at five o'clock, to leave your work at the office over the weekend, and to find some hobbies to be passionate about. Symptom stuff.

But journey upstream and you'll likely find that being a workaholic isn't really the problem, "plain and simple." There are probably some false gods backstage in your life, creating havoc. What motivations would make someone a workaholic? It could be materialism and the drive for more, more, more. That's definitely an idol.

Or it could be that money isn't really what work is all about for you; you could actually be serving the god of perfectionism. Are you one of those people who is never happy with the results, who thinks it should be done better?

What about the god of power? Maybe you're getting caught up in accumulating as much control as possible because power is important.

Behind all of these, of course, could be that incredibly pervasive god of *me*. I would look at this one very closely. Are you building a monument to your own abilities and personal value through the competence of how you do your work?

It all comes down to what's happening in your heart. And that's why Jesus put so much emphasis there. He wasn't quick to reward good behavior if the heart wasn't right. In Matthew 15:8 Jesus

said of the religious leaders, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Later in the chapter Jesus says, “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts — murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matt. 15:17 – 19).

We want to focus on the outside, but Jesus makes the point that it’s all about what’s inside. The heart is the battleground for the gods because everything flows from it.

I was talking to a friend of mine who is a cardiologist. He was telling me about a procedure called an arteriogram that is used to diagnose how healthy a heart is. Here’s how it works: He injects a dye into the bloodstream, then an X-ray is taken of the arteries to locate any blockages. Once they locate a blockage, he will insert a stent through the patient’s leg and open up the blood vessel.

But what is interesting is that frequently a heart problem goes undetected and undiagnosed for years. No arteriogram is done to test the heart. Why? Because the symptoms don’t seem relevant. A patient may face insomnia, back pain, a loss of appetite, anxiety, vision problems, and other challenges. But the patient seeks medical help to treat the *symptoms*. They think they have a sleeping issue or a back pain issue or a vision issue, when in truth it’s a heart issue. It’s cardiovascular, and until that is addressed, the patient isn’t going to get better.

## A Spiritual Arteriogram

It’s difficult to see ourselves as idol worshipers. Whatever our symptoms might be, we struggle to connect them to the throne of the heart and what occupies it. But that is where the battle is being fought. So I want to ask you to do a spiritual arteriogram to dis-

cover your heart health. I'm going to ask you a series of questions that only you can answer.

Think of these questions as dye being injected into your bloodstream that will help reveal and locate some problem areas.

## **What Disappoints You?**

When we feel overwhelmed by disappointment, it's a good sign that something has become far more important to us than it should be. Disproportionate disappointment reveals that we have placed intense hope and longing in something other than God.

So if you were to identify your greatest disappointments, where would you point? The realm of career? The lives of your children? Your marriage or your sex life? Erwin Lutzer writes, "Have you ever thought that our disappointments are God's way of reminding us that there are idols in our lives that must be dealt with?"<sup>2</sup>

## **What Do You Complain about the Most?**

This question is similar to the last, but we're looking at the outside this time — what you express. This might be a good time to get an objective opinion. Ask someone close to you about your typical complaints.

If you constantly complain about your financial situation, maybe money has become too important to you.

If you constantly whine to your spouse about your sex life, maybe sexual pleasure has become a god.

If you constantly complain about a lack of respect in the office, maybe what other people think about you matters more than it should.

If you constantly complain about what kind of year your team is having, maybe sports has become your god.

What we complain about reveals what really matters to us. Whining shows what has power over us.

Whining, in many ways, is the opposite of worshiping the Lord. Worship is when we glorify God for who he is and acknowledge what he has done for us, but whining is ignoring who God is and forgetting what he has done for us.

## **Where Do You Make Financial Sacrifices?**

More on this later, but the Bible says where your treasure is, that's where your heart is also. Where your money goes shows what god is winning your heart. So take a look at your bank statements and credit card bills, and pretend that you are examining the spending habits of a perfect stranger to find out what is most important to them.

## **What Worries You?**

It could be the idea of losing someone significant, or losing your job or house or talent. It could be the fear of being ridiculed. Maybe it's the fear of being alone. You can care so deeply about something that it has a hold on you deep inside and is revealed when your mind is in free form mode at night. Whatever it is that wakes you — or for that matter keeps you up — has the potential to be an idol.

## **Where Is Your Sanctuary?**

Where do you go when you're hurting?

Let's say it's been a terrible day at the office. You come home and go — where? To the refrigerator for comfort food like ice cream? To the phone to vent with your most trusted friend? Do you seek escape in novels or movies or video games or pornography? Where do you look for emotional rescue?

The Bible tells us that God is our refuge and strength, our help in times of trouble — so much so that we will not fear though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea (Ps. 46:1 – 2). That strikes

me as a good place to run. But it's so easy to forget, so easy for us to run in other directions. Where we go says a lot about who we are. The "high ground" we seek reveals the geography of our values.

When I was interviewed for my current ministerial position, the elders of the church asked me various questions. One seemed particularly important to them: Tell us about your sufferings and hardships.

I thought about it and came up with a challenge or two I'd faced, but had to admit I'd never really suffered. One of the elders was concerned about that response. I thought, What am I supposed to do? Go lose a loved one?

Since he kept pushing the issue, he finally explained, "You don't know who people really are until they've suffered."

A few weeks later, I came home from work and went upstairs to awaken Morgan from her nap. She was two at the time. I saw that her five-foot-tall pine dresser had fallen over, and then I realized she was under it. My heart almost stopped. I frantically moved the furniture and saw that my daughter was black and blue.

We rushed her to the hospital, and there was a flurry of tests and X-rays. Nothing was broken. She was breathing but unresponsive. Nerve damage was likely. I remember sitting in that dark hospital hall as they took her in for the initial X-rays. I was on the floor with my back against the wall, crying and praying. I began to sing, "Our God Is an Awesome God."

A week later, though my daughter was awake, she was unable to walk. Her left leg just wouldn't move. I kept praying, clinging to God, and as time went on, she improved. She's fine these days, but I realized along the way that the elder had been right. I needed to learn something about myself, see how things would be between God and me when life got hard.

I discovered he would be my sanctuary even if my deepest fears were realized.

## What Infuriates You?

Everyone has a hot button or two — something that we say “makes us crazy.” Are you so competitive that you can’t stand for your team to lose a pickup game at the gym? Could it be that being the best is your idol? How do you respond sitting in traffic? When someone cuts you off, drives too close, speeds up and won’t let you in, why does this stranger have so much power over your emotions? What about when someone embarrasses you or doesn’t treat you with respect? What’s the real issue here? Maybe your quick temper reveals the oldest idol of them all — the god of me.

## What Are Your Dreams?

If nightmares are revealing, so are daydreams — the places we *choose* for our imagination to go. What fantasy has a grip on you and puts a twinkle in your eye? Do you dream of being the next American Idol, or maybe a first-round draft pick? Aspirations are fine, but the question is why you aspire to those things.

Is your motivation to give God glory or is your motivation your own glory, fame, and fortune?