

Relating, Dating, And Mating Part #3 “Idolatry And Relationships”

I. How We Relate To God Always Connects To The Way We Relate To Others. A couple illustrations:

- **The student who had to tell my friend Steve that he is “one of the best jugglers under the age of 18 in the world.”** Do you think he needs to understand his identity in Christ? What is that makes *you* matter? This will always show up in your relationships.
- **Don Miller and the lifeboat story** (from “Searching For God Knows What”) “Why should *you* get to stay in the lifeboat?” You have an answer to that question, and it is affecting your relationships.

1. God created us to be other-centered but sin traps us in the “inward curvature of the soul” (Luther’s phrase.)

This can’t help but have a huge impact on our relationships. Tim Lane and Paul Tripp summarize the six ways sin affects us this way (see the chart on page 36 of their book “Relationships: A Mess Worth Making”)

1. **Sin makes you *self-centered*** - When you reject God you create a void that you try to fill with yourself.
2. **Sin makes you committed to *self-rule*** - When God’s wise and loving rule over you is replaced with self-rule, other people become your subjects and are expected to do your bidding and bow to your control.
3. **Sin makes you *self-sufficient*** – When you reject God, you believe that delusion that you are not dependent. And if you don’t believe you are dependent upon God you will rarely be dependent upon others.
4. **Sin makes you *self-righteous*** – When the holiness of God is not your standard you will set yourself up as that standard which makes you want to show other people their “sin” but never want to look at your own.
5. **Sin makes you *self-satisfied*** – When you fail to find satisfaction in God you will use everything else (material things or relationships) to try to find satisfaction. You will never live for something bigger than yourself – everything becomes a means to the end of you being satisfied.
6. **Sin makes *self-taught*** – When you are you own source of truth and wisdom, you will never develop the humble teachable spirit that is vital for good relationships.

2. The fact is, when we reject God’s love, our relationships become too important, or not important enough.

This is what we see in Genesis 3:16b where God tells the woman that because of sin, “*Your desire will be for your husband, and he [or “it” – the Hebrew can be translated either way] will rule over you.*” Translators debate over whether the text is saying your *husband* will rule over you (because the woman is cursed to being over-dependent) or whether it is saying your *desire* will rule over you in the sense that you will seek to dominate him rather than being inter-dependent. I think that we see both dynamics at work in relationships after the fall – some move sinfully toward over-dependence and some toward independence.

3. We are somewhere on the continuum between isolation and immersion

Tim Lane and Paul Tripp in their book describe how we are all somewhere on the continuum between isolation (“I want to be safe”) and immersion (“I need you in order to live”). They point out that “*every relational decision we make is moving in one of these two directions*” and “*we are tempted to make a relationship either less or more than it was intended to be.*” They argue that most of our problems in relationships are a result of where two people are on this continuum and most relationships fall into one of three categories:

- **The frustrated relationship** – where one person moves toward isolation while the other is moving toward immersion. The isolationist thus feels smothered and the immersionist feels rejected.
- **The enmeshed relationship** – where both people are moving toward immersion. Both people are doomed to ride the roller coaster of each other’s emotions and are easily hurt, and highly critical. Usually most of the energy in the relationship is spent dealing with minor offenses, real or imagined.
- **The isolated relationship** – where both people are moving toward isolation because each of the them is very aware of the dangers of relationships and constantly opts for safety.

4. What is going on in all of this? Idolatry!

Relationships are always difficult when we worship something other than God because our relationships with other people were to be lived in the context of loving God above all other things. “*Whenever the things you want become more important than God, your relationships suffer. Even when you make your relationships more important than God your relationships suffer.*” (Lane and Tripp)

- **Idolatry is the Bible’s term for the way we will worship something if we reject worship of the true God, and it is a key concept for understanding our relationship problems – and for finding healing! Worship is our problem and it is the key to our healing as well!**

II. Understanding Idolatry Is The Key To Real Change And Healing

1. Under every sin is the sin of making God into something less than He really is – making Him into an idol!

Luther says any sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something, which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. Therefore, in sin we are always 'forgetting' what God has done for us in Christ and instead are being moved by some idol. Luther says that to fail to believe God accepts us fully in Christ and to look to something else is a failure to keep the first commandment - love God with all the heart. Thus beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation. Point: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do-whether obeying or disobeying - by pride ("self-love") or fear ('of damnation'). Apart from 'grateful remembering' of the gospel, all good works are done then for sinful motives. Mere moral effort may restrain the heart, but does not truly change the heart. Moral effort merely jury rigs the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses. (Tim Keller)

2. Your fears are the key to understanding your idols. Tim Keller says that if you pull up your idols you will find your fears clinging to the roots. This is because your idols cluster around the pain you've experienced in your life and are your feeble attempt to bring guaranteed safety and control into your life.

3. Our hearts are drawn from other “treasures” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is. What we worship shapes and molds us! *“And we, who with unveiled faces all gaze upon the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* 2Corinthians 3:18

Thomas Chalmers (19th century Scottish Presbyterian) called this truth the “expulsive power of a new affection.” By that phrase he means that you never really get over one love until a new one comes along. **The key change is to have Jesus become more beautiful and believable to us than our idols!** *“The most effective way of withdrawing the heart from one object is not by turning it away upon desolate and unpeopled vacancy, but by presenting to its regard another object more alluring still.”* Chalmers

4. What we are trying to get from our idols we already have in Christ if we are His child! It is only when we remember this that we can let go of the idols we so desperately cling to for comfort or security or meaning.

5. The good news is that God Himself does battle with our idols when we are trapped! And He does this by attacking on two fronts at once. He shows us how empty and powerless our idols are *and* He shows us that in Him we already have what we are trying to get from our idols!

Isaiah 44 is one of the greatest places to see this in the Bible. God mocks the idols and those who worship them – but that is not enough. Because even if the thing we are trusting in, the “thing in our right hand” (the hand of power in that culture) is a lie – we are blinded! As Keller says idols bind us and blind us. We need to be rescued. And God comes to the rescue in the gospel! Listen to how Isaiah describes the idol-worshipper and how God calls us to remember who He is as the antidote to putting our hope in worthless idols: *“He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”²¹ “Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you.²² I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”²³ Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.* Isaiah 44:20-23

6. Understanding idolatry is vital for the deep repentance that comes not just from seeing our sin, but from seeing the kindness and mercy of God (Rom 2:4 “the kindness and mercy of God which was designed to lead them to repentance.”) *“While I regarded God as a tyrant I thought my sin a trifle; But when I knew Him to be my Father, then I mourned that I could ever have kicked against Him. When I thought God was hard, I found it easy to sin; but when I found God so kind, so good, so overflowing with compassion, I smote upon my breast to think that I could ever have rebelled against One who loved me so, and sought my good.”* C.H. Spurgeon

Conclusion

1. We must gaze upon Jesus and Him crucified, the “Kindness of God” in the flesh! *“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, She saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”* (Titus 3:4-5a) *The most powerful picture of the love of God, the patience of God, the wrath of God, the wisdom of God etc. etc. is Jesus crucified! We gaze upon Him in worship, we gaze upon Him in our meditation on scripture, and we gaze upon Him in the sacraments which are the gospel promises preached in a picture!*

2. We must repent and rest on Jesus! As Jonah 2:8 says *“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”* And Isaiah 30:15 reminds us, *“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...”* And best of all, Jesus invites, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28)