

A Christmas Devotional

*The Gospel
Is Better*

FALSE IDOLS AND
THEIR FALSE PROMISES

HOPE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Merry Christmas, Hope Community!

Consider this fun fact to share at your next holiday party: the world record for longest train happened in 2001 with one stretching 4.5 miles! Imagine a locomotive (actually, 8!) pulling 682 cars weighing almost 100,000 tons. Wow!

Now, imagine the true meaning of Christmas were the locomotive. How many trains have we attached to this season?! They may have been added due to culture, or our upbringing, or the church, or traditions, or work. Some cars may carry cargo that is vitally important to you as part of celebrating this season. There may be other cars that simply slow you down and take, rather than add, during this season.

This devotional is an attempt to bless you by focusing on the locomotive, which is Jesus, the Christ, God with us.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ~Luke 2:8-14

This devotional is best read alongside an open bible. Some entries are longer; others are shorter. Some writers choose to use one space after a period while others opt for two spaces. Not all biblical references are included below but all passages are fire (as the younger hipper among us like to say), capable of warming the soul this Christmas season. So enjoy! This is compiled by staff and elders of Hope Community as our gift to you this Christmas season.

Merry Christmas!

Pastor Cor

Achievement Idolatry

**“I am being recognized for my accomplishments,
and I am excelling in my work.”**

In Christ we have confidence before God (2 Corinthians 3:4). It's through the work of the Spirit, not myself that I have empowered to do the work that he has set out for me. (2 Corinthians 3:5). It is through Jesus alone that I'm competent - not in the work that I do or set out to accomplish. What I proclaim, what I desire to represent is not myself but Jesus Christ alone. It is for his name sake alone that I strive to do my best, trusting in his power and grace to carry me through (Philippians 4:5-6). Because the work I do is for Christ and Christ alone, I renounce secret and shameful ways; not using deception or distorting the Word of God (2 Corinthians 4:2). For what I desire is to profess Jesus Christ as Lord - to him be the glory, power and honor.

(2 Corinthians 4:5). I renounce looking to my own desires and proclaiming my name - for scripture says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4). At the end of it all, it isn't about me and making my name known but about him and making his name known. He is the example, the one I can turn to in knowing how best to be a representative of his Gospel message.

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians (2:6-11)

Materialism Idolatry

“I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions.”

While life may be difficult due to financial woes. God speaks a better word. God says “without money, come buy and eat” (Isaiah 55:1). Regardless of wealth, God’s grace and spirit satisfies our every need. God speaks a better word. Jesus promised his disciples “100 times as much...and eternal life” for laying down everything they have and following him (Matthew 19:29). That’s no small reward for not attaining a certain level of wealth. God speaks a better word. That “My feet stand on level ground; in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.” (Psalm 26:12) and that ultimately, regardless of race, creed, nationality, - wealth or poverty - we’re all sons and daughters of Christ if we follow him (Galatians 3:26-29). God speaks a better word.

Inner Ring Idolatry

“A particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in.”

The gospel speaks a better word. The gospel affirms that we were created for community (Genesis 2:18), and a sense of belonging naturally follows. However, sin seizing that opportunity often leads to groups feeling superiority over others (Ezekiel 36:22), or even a desire to surpass God (Genesis 11). The gospel levels us all to our created state as humanity (Galatians 3:28), and highlights our inability to gain acceptance by our own status or ability. Instead, our longing to be included is ultimately fulfilled in the realization that God chose us (Ephesians 1). We are now a part of a new group where our true identity lies (1 Peter 2:9). That is what unifies us, and allows us to see past the multitude of differences we possess and say, “brother, sister”. Where cultural difference brought division and criticism, we can see unity and celebration. We hope for the day when that will be truly seen and realized (Revelation 7:9).

Racial/Cultural Idolatry

“My race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior.”

In 2017, when Hope took up earnest conversations on how the gospel impacts race, we landed on some very important truths.

#1 – ALL people are created equal by God. Therefore, racism exists because biblical anthropology doesn't. Put another way, if we lived under God as he's created us to, racism would cease to exist. Or there is no such thing as racial superiority in God's eyes. He has made each race and culture beautiful and worthy and virtuous.

#2 – Looking down on anyone because of their race or culture is always sinful. It is a failure to see and treat each race and culture as beautiful and worthy and virtuous. This looking down can take a myriad of forms ranging from outright hostility and violence to insensitive joking to unconscious biases.

#3 – Because racism and ethno-centrism are sins, we must turn to Jesus for forgiveness and grace. And, wherever such sins become manifest, we confess our sins, apologize to those we've wronged, learn from our mistakes, seek greater understanding, and become aware of biases that may exist in and around us.

#4 - Because the Church has Christ, through his Spirit, we re-embrace a biblical anthropology and identify those things (e.g. money, sex, power, control, advantage, policy, etc.) used to perpetuate inequalities in our world.

Perhaps there's been no greater divide than that between a Jewish and non-Jewish people. Yet look how Scripture describes those Jews and non-Jews who are united to Christ:

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ~Ephesians 2:14-18

God speaks a better word than racism and ethno-centrism. In Christ, God declares unity amidst differences in race and culture. In Christ, God declares peace over and against division. In Christ, God speaks of creating one new community from the two. In Christ, hostility between races is swallowed up as we together come to the Father through the same Spirit.

Created equal by the same God, saved through the same Christ, and given equal access by the same Spirit. For all of our differences, which we should celebrate rather than denigrate, we are one in Him. That's something to celebrate this Christmas!

Control Idol

**“I am able to get mastery over my life
in the area of _____.”**

The Gospel speaks a better word than the idol of control. The gospel says that not only is control (sovereignty) something that only God truly possesses (Prov 19:21, Rom 9:15-16), but that the allure of achieving mastery is just a veiled but sinful attempt to gain our own righteousness (Phil 3:3-9) or even more so, a belief that we ultimately know better than God (Job 38:4-7). The very fact that we are in need of a savior because of our fallen condition (Rom 3:23), that we can't do it on our own (Titus 3:3) flies in the face of this idol. We gain a better, true, abundant life when we yield control to him who is truly in control (John 10:10) and abide in his promises of mercy, love, justice, and forgiveness found only in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (John 15)

Comfort Idolatry

“I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life”

During Jesus encounter with a rich young ruler in Matthew 19:20-21, the man who is a devout Jew asks how inherit eternal life, Jesus replies with a list of OT laws. Then the man says, “All these I have kept, “What do I still lack?”

It isn't inconceivable that this man was telling the truth. Jesus doesn't come back with, “Liar!” Jesus simply says, 21 ... “you lack one thing, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

So either Jesus is bad at math by telling the man he lacks one thing and then tells him three things to do, or he is getting at something deeper that the man truly lacks – Jesus.

This man seemed to have it all, we don't know much about him, but he has the title “rich young ruler” for a reason.

We can speculate that this man had lack of nothing, or a very comfortable life. But he was unable to give up his comfort for Jesus.

Just a few verses later, Jesus will say in verse 30, 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Jesus, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the creator of everything, gave everything, even his own life so that we could have life. Abundant life. Eternal life. A Satisfying life. Nowhere does the Bible say our lives will be comfortable. In fact, it says just the opposite (All of 1 Peter). He gave so we could live, and now we have been commissioned to live in a way that proclaims him who called us out of darkness and into marvelous light, and that is not comfortable, but as Jesus says to his disciples after his encounter with the rich young ruler, “29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

Image Idolatry

“I have a particular kind of look or body image.”

Culture says that your image is based on what you can control. How skinny you are, how many muscles you have, the food you put in your body, the list goes on and on. The Gospel speaks a better word. Image is not based on anything that we have done but it is based on everything that Christ has already accomplished. We look in the mirror and see flawed and Christ looks at us and sees us as the creation that bears his image (Genesis 1:27). It is easy to fixate on the parts of our image that we are ashamed of even when Christ has said that we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). Our image is created to bring Christ glory, we each bear the image of God in a different way, when we put our focus on what our image (especially our outer image) we miss the uniqueness in the way God has created us and others (1 Corinthians 12: 12-27). God made no mistake when he created you. When we allow the flaws or perfections to consume our thoughts, we are missing the intricate ways in which Christ has knit us together in order to bring himself Glory (Psalm 139:13). Our image reflects different parts of the creator of the world, He has made his creation (including you) beautiful.

Ideology Idolatry

“My political or social cause is making progress and ascending in influence or power.”

There's something good and God-given deep within us that drives us to come along side others and help those in need. God has wired us (common grace) and gifted us (through knowing Christ's example, Philippians 2:1-11) with hearts of compassion and mercy.

We also know, deep within our souls that this world is very broken and we are in deep need of salvation, making it incredibly tempting to believe that we can save humanity or the world through our human efforts. This is especially tempting for passionate people who are greatly inclined to mercies or justice. Why? Because we care deeply. At the same time, we take the misguided step of elevating our cause to the level of salvific. Of course, this is nothing more than pride and repetition of Adam & Eve's original sin (Genesis 3) of believing they could somehow become like God himself.

This is precisely where the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in his atoning death and resurrection, speaks a better word. Christ, and Christ alone, can save us as individuals and this entire world in which we live (Romans 3:22-25). No cause, be it in the name of relieving human suffering, defending the powerless, or saving the beauty of creation can take the place of Christ's sacrifice that will one day be fulfilled in full consummation of humanity and the Earth. (Revelation 21:1-5)

Family Idolatry

“My children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me.”

We all come from somewhere. We have a story that was shaped, for better or worse, by those of influence in our lives and that we hope to shape for those in our own. It seems as if in Christian circles especially, the elevation of the “perfect” family and familial relationships can quickly stray from a good thing to a God thing. While we are called to honor our parents and care for our children well as acts of love and obedience (Ex. 20:12, Eph. 6:4, Col. 3:21), those aspirations can easily drift to being our source—of joy, identity, and fulfillment.

The Gospel speaks a better word. It reminds us that nothing will satisfy the deep emptiness in our hearts—not getting the Super Mom or Perfect Son awards, not any other approval granted by others—despite our best efforts (Ecc. 2). Fullness of life can only be found in Christ (John 4:13-14; 10:10), and making anything but the Gospel central in our relationships diminishes our opportunity to grow in our understanding of this truth with those around us. Humility, grace, and love all come in recognizing our imperfections and leaning into Christ.

Just as the disciples were called to check their own hearts as they went out into ministry (Matt. 10:37-39), we too must remember that no other goal, relationship, possession—even our own lives—should be greater than our love for the Lord and obedience to His calling. In Christ, we step into a new identity, a new set of priorities, a new family (Mark 3:31-35, John 1:12-13). We are part of the Kingdom.

Work Idolatry

**“I am highly productive
and getting a lot done.”**

If work defines our identity and is the pathway to eternal glory, then we will work ourselves to prideful isolation and/or hate ourselves for never measuring up.

The gift of the gospel is that in great success and devastating failure my identity and future hope is not destroyed. My eternal identity is from outside my work and myself, which means I am free to take risks, but also very OK when I'm not the most productive or successful. The gospel transforms us from being lords of our world to servants of God's world. (Romans 6:18)

Christ has done the perfect, finished work of securing our position in His kingdom which is far greater than any position I could earn in this life. This allows me to work hard to bring life and justice to the world around me within the safety of God's grace and released from selfish-ambition so others can know their position has already been won and are freed to help others know this good news. (Phil. 3:17-21, Gal. 5, John 19:28-30)

When we worship our work we can demonize our rest, making sabbath a work of Satan, believing it only slows my worship of the true god, Production. This is a lie. So to rest in Christ's work, we are waging war on the lies of the devil and pushing back the darkness that tells us that rest is powerless, when we know weakness is strength in God's economy. (2 Corinthians 4:16, Psalm 46:10, 2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Religion Idolatry

“I am adhering to my religion’s moral codes and accomplished in its activities.”

The whisper to adhere to a religious code is as old as our earliest ancestors. The temptation in the garden (Genesis 3) to hold the knowledge of good and evil is only appealing because behind this information is an opportunity. With said knowledge, Adam and Eve and all of us humans born in their image, believe we possess the ability to do good and avoid evil -- and thereby earn lasting significance and life itself on our own.

As the story of the Bible and the accounts of human history both reveal, knowledge of right and wrong does not equate to an ability to do that which is expected of us, not only by a holy God, but even of ourselves! (i.e. I think of all the times I’ve said or thought that person should really listen more, or stop being so arrogant...and then 2 days later I do or fail to do this very thing myself!). Even when Israel receives crystal clear clarity directly from God about that which is good and evil, they still manage to make a mess of themselves, their communities, and their God in the eyes of other nations (Exodus 19; Jeremiah 2:13). The story of the Bible reveals that the problems that came about when sin entered the world need a far greater solution than more knowledge about what should be done.

Praise God that he didn’t and still doesn’t leave us to fend for ourselves, but instead sent his Son to free us from the crushing burden of trying to accomplish lasting life and significance apart from him. Jesus set us free from the original, enslaving lie of the serpent that we could live apart from God. By dying our death, he saves us from life under law, and by coming back to life, he bring us under his grace, so that through him, we can actually bear fruit for God (Gal 4:1-7; Romans 7:4). Where religion said and still tries to say: “do this and live,” the gospel says “behold, it is finished – believe!” (Romans 10:1-5) When I hear the old, familiar voice of the serpent whispering, “you should fear, you’re not doing enough,” I’m invited to hear the celebratory chorus of thousands upon thousands of angels singing “rejoice, Jesus paid it all!” (Hebrews 12)

Relationship Idolatry

“Mr. or Ms. ‘Right’ is in love with me.”

If you were asked to describe your “Mr. Right” or “Mrs. Right”, what would you say?

Our culture idolizes love, specifically the love that one receives from another. We don't tend to idolize biblical love, the type of love that gives and sacrifices and counts the other as greater than ourselves. Instead culture idolizes a warped view of love. It's a view of love that is self-focused. It is something I receive from another. And the best way to receive from another is finding that special someone.

It's amazing to see how flipped this is compared to the gospel storyline. Friends, Jesus speaks a better word. Consider how Jesus is described prior to his coming:

14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness...2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. ~Isaiah 52:14, 53:2-3

Is that how you originally described your “Mr. Right” or “Mrs. Right”? Probably not.

Yet, more than anyone else, he has loved you more deeply and purely and completely and eternally. No person has loved you or ever will love you better than Jesus.

How has he loved us? The passage continues:

4 Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. 9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...12 For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. ~Isaiah 53:4-10, 12

Perfect love isn't something Jesus hopes to receive from us. It's something he gives us. So there is a perfect love out there. There is a perfect someone. Yet too many hide their faces from him and seek a perfect love elsewhere. This Christmas, let's return to the one who has truly loved us better than any “Mr. Right” or “Mrs. Right” ever could.

Independence Idolatry

“I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.”

The Gospel says that we were not created to be alone (Genesis 2:18) and that it is, in fact, not good for us to be alone. It is only in community with others that we can reflect God’s image to the world around us. (Genesis 1:27, John 13:34-35) While it might seem that being free from responsibility would bring life and freedom, it will in fact, bring the opposite. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, Proverbs 18:1, 21:13, 1 Timothy 5:8) When we refuse to love those around us by shouldering their burdens, taking care of their needs to the best of our ability, and setting aside our own desires for theirs, we are denying Christ himself. (Phil 2:4, Matthew 25:40, 1 John 3:17-18, 1 John 4:19-21) The truth is that God loves us with no obligation to do so, forgives us in His great mercy despite the fact that we are all his enemies, and He uses us although He doesn’t need to do so to show Himself off to the nations. (Romans 5:10, 1 John 4:7-11) What great news is this! We don’t have to care for people around us, we get to. And when we choose to do so, we acknowledge the great things that have been done for us by our Savior and glorify Him to the world around us.

Approval Idolatry

“I am loved and respected by _____.”

The gospel speaks a better word. The gospel says we are approved, accepted, and infinitely loved by the Lion of Judah, who fights for us. For those who are in Christ Jesus there is not now, nor will there ever be, condemnation (Romans 8:1). His love for us overcame the sting of death, setting us free from the shackles of self-justification (1 Corinthians 15:55). Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation is able to separate us from His love in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). By Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection, God has approved of us and entrusted us with the gospel, so that we may live to please Him and not man (1 Thessalonians 2:4). May our labors be effortful and excellent, overflowing from hearts fully rested in their identity as children of the Lord Almighty (Colossians 3:23). Why slip back into the slavery of seeking the approval of man, from which we have been rescued? If we were still trying to please man, we would not be servants of Christ (Galatian 1:10).

Dependence Idolatry

“Someone is there to protect me
and keep me safe.”

Protection. It is a feeling of being safe and free from harm. Ultimately, it is about living at peace, even though we live in a fallen world. The reality is that the curse is to be found all over the place, and we are NEVER safe and fully protected the way we wish to be. So, we try to create illusions of safety through financial means, health fads, strong relationships and security systems. We then become co-dependent on these things because they have become our god.

However, even in this fallen world, our desire for real protection and real safety can be met. But, not the way that is unhealthy and temporary, but in ways that are real and eternal. Christ has brought me real peace from the violence that was done to him and the only real “peace” I need is not from the fallen world, but from God himself –

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. 6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.
-Romans 5:1-11

Irreligion Idolatry

“I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and am living by a self-made morality.”

Some may not desire to be part of organized religion because being with people can be hard, and they feel burdened by the energy it takes to be in relationship. But the Bible reminds us to continue gathering! Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Gathering as a group offers the chance to connect and encourage one another, to learn and grow together. The early church gathered to learn and live their lives together, and we can find joy and benefit in continuing that today.

Separating from a church body also decreases the opportunity to serve in the unique role that God has set in front of each of us. When we gather, we learn how to compliment one another in skills and roles, making the church a more complete and equipped body, stepping into the world to serve and shine. (i.e. the super robot, Voltron, protecting the planet Arus from the evil King Zarkon) Romans 12:4-6 “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.” Together, the church offers a better example of the character and goodness of God as we work together, supporting and serving as one body.

Another reason someone might decide to refrain from being part of organized religion is that church may include many routines, traditions, and phrases that feel useless or out-dated. But if we remember the ways people have gathered to celebrate and remember the goodness and faithfulness of God, we can join in the practice of taking opportunities to do the same. In one example, God asked His people to remember His rescue by annually celebrating with the passover feast. It was a time to remember and share with their children the amazing story of deliverance! If their children asked, “Why do we do this??” they were given repeated opportunities to share the stories and truth. Every time that we gather is another opportunity to tell the world (our children, our neighbors, our friends) why we do what we do. Not only can we celebrate and remember together, we can also communicate to the world around us.

Because of Christ, we can choose to continually gather as a group, potentially entering uncomfortable situations and doing inconvenient things. We want to learn and grow together, be part of the body functioning as one, and remember, celebrate, and acknowledge the amazing God of the universe.

Instagrammable Life Idolatry

“I’m living my best life now as shown through and endless array of envy-invoking pictures”

Worship, in a broad sense of the term, harnesses both expressive and formative elements. That which we give our time, tithe, and attention to allows us to shape the world, but also has the powerful ability to shape us: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

Often times, the liturgy of the Instagrammable life is marked by either beauty-broadcasting or attention-seeking. The former practice can lower barriers and foster mutual understanding, while the latter further perpetuates the masks we are innately inclined to uphold. More frequently than not, these motives do not exist in sharp binary, but with a mix of righteous and unrighteous desires. In the attempt to share our joys and successes with our seven-hundred “best friends”, we may inadvertently create a highlight reel of our lives, stripped of all the beautiful, glorious seasons of sorrow and suffering in which our God creates the most unexpected masterpieces.

Brothers and sisters, this is not an Instagram problem, but a “what you do with your Instagram” problem (Romans 1:23; Ephesians 6:10-13). What place does this medium hold in your heart (Luke 10:27)? Do you know, child of God, that your identify is lodged in the affections of our Risen King (Psalm 139:14-24; 2 Corinthians 5:17)? As you use this tool for expressive outlet, how is it also forming your mind’s attention and your heart’s affection over time (Romans 12:2; Ezekiel 36:26)? Your Instagram account can be, like all facets and crevices of your existence, a place of worship. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and with every post; and love your neighbor as yourself.

Sexual Fulfillment Idolatry

**“My sexual needs are met powerfully
and consistently.”**

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” -Pascal

Deeply embedded within each of us is the need to worship. The objects of that worship are the things or people that have taken the greatest position of importance in our lives. When we seek to fulfill our souls' delight with anything other than God, it is left feeling empty, less-than, and broken. Jesus makes clear the greatest commandment is to only fill our souls with Himself when, in Matthew 23:37, He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 saying that “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

When we believe that anything other than God fulfills us, we are taking that worship that is supposed to be directed toward God and pointing it at something less-than. This is Idolatry. Tainted sexuality is a particularly devious idol because, just as we were created to worship, we were created for sex. And for many, the powerful drive for sex becomes the overriding passion of our lives. Kept in its proper place (Heb 13:4, Matt 19:5), sex is a marvelous means for a married couple to physically express their love to each other. However, when we begin to put this drive and the fulfillment of it in the greatest position in our hearts, this passion can quickly get out of control.

Satan quickly and subtly entices (1 Peter 5:8, James 1:14) an unwitting victim into bondage with a few satisfying sexual experiences. Gradually, the object of the person's desire—whether it be some particular act or a specific type of person—grows into a monstrous idol that lodges itself deep within their heart. Over time this desire takes over and begins to drive the person's heart, mind, and strength. But the Gospel speaks a better word. We know that, though we are tempted, we are strong in Christ (Ps 73:26, Josh 1:9, Is 40:31, Phil 4:13, 1 Cor 10:13). We know that sex was designed as an analogy for Christ's love for the church (Eph 5). We know that any sexual ecstasy we feel on this earth is only a shadow of the ecstasy we will feel when we are united with God for eternity (Luke 20:35). May we seek to worship the creator rather than the creation (Rom 1:25) and to stop trying to fill our desires in our own power and to anticipate His Holy and Righteous fulfillment of our desires.

Helping Idolatry

“People are dependent on me and need me.”

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Ephesians 4:2*

God calls us to help others. The Bible is full of “one another” verses. Therefore encourage one another (1Thes 4:18); Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9); Carry each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2) It’s easy to fall into feeling responsible for a person’s needs being met and soon our focus is on us. We need the right words; we need to fix them or their situation. Our parent’s relationship depends on us. Soon helping becomes our identity. If we help someone or fix a situation we feel really good about ourselves. But when our efforts aren’t being received as helpful, we try harder, we feel rejected and hurt that we’re not being appreciated. Being the source of help becomes a bigger and bigger deal.

We love being needed and yet the burdens are greater than we can handle. It’s too big of a job because God never called us to love our neighbor in this way. As the helper we are as needy as the person we are helping. We both need God’s light shed on our hearts; we both need God to be our everything, our Savior, healer, wisdom, strength etc.

Let’s remember that our identity comes from Christ (Col 3:3). Out of His fullness we move into helping the people God calls us to by letting God work in us and through us (Eph 2:10). Let Him shoulder the burden and receive the glory. And may our hearts overflow with joy (John 15:11) from experiencing God at work through us as we help others.

For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose. ~Philippians 2:13

Self-Expression Idolatry

“I am able to give full voice to my beliefs on life, politics, religion, everything.”

The gospel speaks a better word. The world says that my moral code and my interpretation of justice must be loudly proclaimed. But Jesus, who was sinless in every way, was oppressed and afflicted in history’s greatest injustice, “yet he did not open his mouth, led like a lamb to the slaughter.” (Isa. 53:7.) The world claims that my personal views are authoritative simply because they are mine. But Jesus, to whom all authority under heaven and earth have been given, “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Phil. 2:7.) The world declares that my right to be heard and agreed with on all political and social aspects of life is inviolate. But Jesus replied, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (Matt. 22:21.) The world proclaims I am entitled to a platform to be heard, to promote, and to magnify my voice. But Jesus—“the image of the invisible God . . . in whom all things hold together”—took on flesh and was born a baby in a manger, humanly unable to speak. (Col. 1:15-17; John 1:1, 14.) The world says our stories are to be exalted and affirmed. But the sacrificial love of Jesus makes us witnesses to a beautiful gospel story not our own. (2 Cor. 5.)

Perfect Parent/Child Idolatry

“I’m viewed as a competent parent through having successful, obedient, and believing children.”

More than any other generation, today’s parents are worried sick that they will mess up their children’s lives. A massive 2010 study revealed that parents post significantly higher rates of depression than adults without children*. If our parenting and worth is to be judged by the outcome of our children what do we make of God our Father? If God’s success as a parent is to be judged by his children, does God himself pass our parenting test? It is time to rethink our assumptions and even our calling as parents. First, remember that even as an earthly parent you are God’s child. He loves you and gives good gifts. Your worth and values is based on your relationship with your heavenly father which he freely gives to you as his child. He is slow to anger and abounding with compassion and mercy towards you (Psalm 145:8).

Secondly, He does give us as earthly parents responsibilities such as to diligently teach our children the word of the Lord (Deut 6:6-7); to provide (1 Tim 5:8); to honor (Rom 12:10) and even that they learn to obey (Eph 6:1). But mostly he has given you as a parent his gospel so that you can love your children freely. And above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). That is good news indeed!

*National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Depression, Parenting Practices, and the Healthy Development of Children; England MJ, Sim LJ, editors

Suffering Idolatry

“I am hurting, in a problem; only then do I feel worthy of love or able to deal with guilt.”

While it is certainly true that God cares deeply for the weary and burdened and gives them rest (Matthew 11: 28), it's also true that he loves those who feel like they are in a care free season of their lives. When life is going well, there is a temptation to feel as if we can do things on our own and we don't really need God. During these times God often feels distant and we may feel guilty that we have it too good or aren't suffering enough. But the truth is, when we are experiencing life's "highs" we need Christ just as much as when we are experiencing life's "lows." It's especially when we feel as if we are in control of our lives that we need to remember that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). And in these times, we can cling to the truth that God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). What incredible news! And the more clearly we see our sin, the more reason we have to rejoice! The Apostle Paul says that he knows what it is to be in need and he knows what it is to have plenty, but regardless of his circumstances he learned to be content and rejoice greatly in the Lord (Philippians 4:10-12). It's because of what Christ has done for us, that when life is going well, extol the Lord at all times and have his praise on our lips (Psalm 34:1).

Power Idolatry

“I have power and influence over others.”

The gospel speaks a better word. The gospel says life comes through Christ. Therefore, we need not secure power or influence as a source of life. Consider Jesus. Having all power and authority (Mt. 28:18), he emptied himself and took the nature of a servant even unto death (Jn. 10:15, Phil. 2:7-8). The bible makes clear that Jesus is worthy take the scroll and open its seals because he was slain and with his blood he purchased for God persons from every tongue, tribe, and nation (Rev. 5:9). Instead of using his divine authority and power for his own advantage – to be served - He gave of his life in love and service demonstrating his worth to open the scroll. Jesus makes clear that lording authority over another happens amongst the rulers of the Gentiles (Mt. 20:25, Lk. 22:27) but ought not be so in the church (1 Peter 5:3). We experience life in Christ, ultimately, not by be trying to secure power and influence over others but through giving and serving. So much so, we willingly give up power and influence – truly, our very lives (Mt. 10:39, 16:25) – for the sake of the gospel. And in so doing, we gain Christ, who is everything, who is our lives.

Individual Person Idolatry

“I’m ok when this one person is in my life and happy to be there, and/or happy with me”

Who is it for you? Who is that one person whose opinion towers above the rest?

- Boss?
- Best friend?
- Spouse?
- Mentor?
- Boyfriend?
- Girlfriend?
- Teacher?
- Roommate?
- Neighbor?

Perhaps it’s a combination of a few or maybe a rotating target depending on the season. No matter what life may dish your way, if this person is in your life and happy to be there, there is a bit more of a hop in your step and problems seem more like opportunities. You feel seen, valued, and worth it. But if we change the equation so that this person is no longer excited about you, than no matter how much things seem to be going your way, the forecast of your life always seems to be a bit cloudy. The familiar confidence and hop in your step has been replaced with doubt and insecurity and our response ranges from attempting to work our way back into the good graces of this individual or withdrawing in an attempt to protect ourselves. The result of both options is often more clouds.

If we had an hour to solve why we so frequently fall into this pattern, I’d have us spend 55 minutes reading the fourth chapter of John’s gospel and then 5 minutes thinking about solutions. Because it’s here unlike any other place in the Scripture that we hear from the Great Physician, that our diagnosis is a thirsty soul. Notice, however, that our souls are thirsty not because something went wrong, but instead our souls are thirsty by design. Just like the phones in our pockets, we were made to plug into a greater source to function properly. The human soul can’t live off the esteem of another human for the same reason that our phones can’t pull a charge from a pineapple. It won’t work! (and you’ll likely ruin stuff...)

The solution to a thirsty soul is to drink the right water – the water that springs up into eternal life and causes thirst to be no more. Human approval simply can’t do that. The water of the gospel for our thirsty souls hears the voice of our Father in heaven saying he is proud of us because we are in his Son, and that opinion can never waver or change, because it wasn’t established by our hands. Turn up the volume of God’s opinion of you in Jesus and let the gospel clear your clouds today.

Glory to God in the
highest heaven, and on
earth peace to those on
whom his favor rests.

Luke 2:14