

The Biblical Heart (Part 6)

By Wendy Wood



We all have things we want. We all have desires. These desires reflect what we love and treasure.

We saw in the previous blogs how our desires lead us to act. What we want or treasure most, is what we pursue in our words and actions. We want what we want. These desires become idols when we are willing to sin to get them, or if we sin when we do not get them. When we are willing to yell, or pout, or lie, or stew in sinful thoughts over not getting our desire met, we are wanting that idol more than we want to honor God at that moment. Any time we sin, we are wanting something more than to respond in a way that glorifies God.

Matthew 6:21 puts it this way, “**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**”.

We set our hearts on our treasures and then live life in pursuit of that treasure (or desire).

James 4:1-3 tells us that we are often willing to fight and quarrel for our desires. “**What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your**

passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

Our passions are the desires of our heart. When we don't get what we want, we are willing to fight and sin to get it.

A desire is not necessarily sinful. It's good to desire a spouse. It's good to desire respectful children. It's good to desire health. But these good desires turn idolatrous when we want them more than we want to honor God. Whenever we are willing to sin to get our desire, or sin when we might lose our desire, we have made our desire an idol.

When I am willing to sin to get what I want, that thing, that desire, is what is controlling me. I **MUST** have my desire.

Romans 6:16 says, **“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either sin, which to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness.”**

A ruling desire is your master. You are enslaved to your desires. If those desires are anything other than loving God, you are worshiping an idol.

Proverbs 29:25 refers to being in a trap when fear of man rules your heart. The idea is the same. You are trapped into a habit of responding sinfully to get what your heart desires. You are enslaved to wanting people's praise, attention, admiration, or respect in the case of fear of man.

Brad Bigney says “An idol is anything or anyone that begins to capture our hearts and minds and affections more than God.”

An idol typically follows a progression in your heart.

It may start as a desire or want. Think of it as “It would be nice to have _____”. It would be nice to have a quiet evening at home without interruption. It would be nice to have a traffic free commute to work. Those desires are fine. As long as they stay in the realm of not sinning to get them.

From a desire, a want can become a **need or demand**. Now you are no longer just

wanting something, you must have it. You have moved into being convinced you need this desire and life will not be good without it. If you demand a quiet evening, you are willing to snap at your children if they are loud or interrupt you. If you demand an easy commute, you will honk your horn and use hand gestures to the drivers around you. You are willing to sin to get what you want.

A demand then becomes an **expectation**. I should have what I want all the time, you think! People should be catering to my wishes. At this point, you experience more intense emotions. You get angry and anxious frequently when you may not get what you want.

When your expectation is not met, you are **disappointed** and will **punish** those who are in your way. You are using people as a means to get what you want. Anyone who makes life difficult or stands in your way will suffer the consequences of your sin.

To find an idol ask yourself these questions:

What makes me angry or anxious?

Am I willing to sin to get it?

Am I willing to sin if I might lose it?

Do I run to it for refuge instead of going to God?

Ezekiel 14:1-8

“Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him, I the Lord will answer him myself. And I will set my face against that man; I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the

midst of my people, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

First, notice that God’s word says “idols are taken into the heart”. God is talking about what we love and treasure. The Israelites were worshiping Baal and carved idols, yet God says the idols were in their heart. An idol is anything that replaces God in our hearts, minds, and affections.

Second, God’s word says that these idols are stumbling blocks of iniquity before their faces. Iniquity is moral impurity. Paul Tripp says “Iniquity is not just sinful behavior. Iniquity is a sin condition, an escapable state of being that causes us to rebel against God’s authority and break His law.” Our hearts will continually turn to idols because we are sinners. Sin is part of our very nature. A stumbling block means that the idol was affecting their vision or perception of life. It’s like wearing a pair of glasses that have words all over the lenses. The idol affected every interaction they had because they were so intent on getting the idol.

Third, God’s word says that our idols keep us separated from God. We cannot enjoy close fellowship with our heavenly Father when we are enslaved to our sinful desires.

Fourth, God promises to lay hold of His children’s hearts and have them turn away from their idols and repent.

John Calvin said, “the human heart is an idol factory”. We must be diligent to examine our hearts and constantly kill and destroy the idols made in the heart.

Whenever we want something so much, we are willing to sin to get it or keep it, we have an idol in our heart.

At the beginning of this blog, there were four questions posed that help identify idols.

1. What makes me angry or anxious?
2. Am I willing to sin to get it?
3. Am I willing to sin if I might lose it?
4. Do I run to it for refuge instead of going to God?

1 John 5:21 says, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”.

We must understand what our idols are to fight them and mortify the sinful desire.

IDOLS OF THE HEART



Influences - spouse, children, traffic, finances, traffic, health, weather

Emotions - anger, anxiety, fear, happiness, sadness

Idols - Comfort, Approval, Control, Power

Behaviors - yelling, escaping (to food, social media, room), stewing in mind, "churching"

So let's look at how this plays out in real life scenarios.

We tend to be aware of our emotions first. Anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, happiness, and excitement are experienced in our whole person. Our emotions are part of our soul or heart, the immaterial part of our being, but often they affect the physical body, too. For example, when you get angry, your heart rate increases, blood flow increases in your face and extremities, and you feel a surge of energy. God designed our bodies to have these responses because anger should drive us to act - to the glory of God.

Unfortunately, we sinners tend to act for our own glory! Another example of emotions impacting our physical bodies is anxiety. Often intense anxiety can cause an increased

heart rate, an upset stomach as acid increases, and even dizziness or sweating.

So looking at the diagram above, in life, there are influences that impact our daily lives. It could be your spouse, your children, your boss, your commute, your bills or finances, your dog, your health, your friends, the weather, a local news story, a world event, or anything else that you come into contact with during your day. As you take in the influence, what is already in your heart, is revealed. You will be aware of your emotions first. When your spouse says something to you, you react emotionally based on what you desire. If your spouse says something that you agree with or something that seems beneficial to you, your emotions will be positive. If your spouse says something that you don't like, maybe a criticism of you or a change of your plans, you will experience a negative emotion because it is not what you wanted.

Emotions are revealing what we want. If I think I **must have respect**, I will feel angry when I perceive someone has been disrespectful. But if I am shown honor, I will feel good. My feelings go along with whether I am getting what I want.

If I must have comfort, I will be upset when my quiet time is interrupted by someone needing me to do a chore or something I don't want to do. If I get my comfort time, I will feel good about the day.

In the above examples, I am using idolatry language. When I believe "I must have" respect and am willing to sin to get respect, respect has become an idol in my heart. When I believe I deserve to have comfort time and am willing to sin (whether yelling, giving the silent treatment, stopping off in a huff, rolling my eyes, or grumbling), comfort is an idol in my heart. If I believe that my ideas are best and that my plan for my time is the best plan, I will get upset when my schedule is changed or people fail to follow through on our time together. My belief that I should be in control of my time is revealed as an idol when I sinfully respond to my plans not working out.

Emotions alert me to the fact that there is a desire in my heart. And I need to check with scripture and pray for God to help me understand and to act in a way that honors him.

Our most common idols are comfort, control, approval/respect/love (which scripture calls fear of man) and power. Sometimes it is easier to identify a secondary idol, such as marriage or a specific car. However, as we examine why we want to be married or why we want a specific car, we will find that those things give us control, comfort, reputation, or power. A person who idolizes being married may really idolize being loved and accepted, or it may be that having a spouse is a comfort in not having to go places alone. A fancy sports car may provide desired respect for one person but may be a way to control other people for another person.

Idols can be met in different ways for different people so we must be careful to get to the root of what people want. A person who is always on their cell phone may appear to have a cell phone as their idol. They fixate on their phone, they must have the newest model the week it comes out, and they spend hours every day on their phone. But, underneath that desire for the newest, best phone, is a desire for comfort for one person and control for another. The comfort may be that the phone provides an escape from a difficult situation when the phone user can scroll through social media and watch tik-tok videos. Another phone user may find comfort in pornography on their phone. But yet another phone user may use games as a way to feel control. Since they get immediate results from a game, a feeling of “I can control the outcome and restart if I want different results”, can bring a good feeling of being in control. Another phone user may experience positive feelings from being able to be in control of work by constantly checking emails and responding immediately to any problems that come up regarding their work.

Idolatry is blinding. It is hard to understand our hearts. The wise, patient counselor will ask many questions that probe and dig through the layers of desires to find the root idol.

Emotions and behaviors are easy to identify as sinful at times. Most people would agree that their anger is sinful and that the resulting yelling or throwing objects needs to be repented of. But those are just the fruit of not getting the idol that is desired. It is not enough to repent of the outward action or the sinful thinking and feeling. The desire of the heart needs to be repented of. Any desire that is greater than loving God and honoring Him in the response to our situation, is an idol. How to lead counselees to repent at the idol level will be coming in another blog.

The questions below, often referred to as the Struggle Journal, is a good tool to help counselees begin to understand their heart. As situations happen throughout the week, have your counselee answer these 5 questions at least 14 times a week and have them keep the journal for several weeks. This will help you identify patterns in their emotions, thoughts, and desires.

Struggle Journal Questions:

What happened?

What were you thinking and feeling?

What did you do?

What did you want? What was your desired situation?

What was the result?

Here are some examples:

Struggle Journal Questions				
What was the situation? What happened?	What were you thinking and feeling?	What did you do?	What were you wanting? What did you desire to have happen?	What was the outcome?
My teenager was disrespectful to me	Angry "Here we go again. Why can't he just listen?!"	I took away his phone for a day.	I just wanted to come home from work and relax.	We were both angry and didn't speak the rest of the night.
Got home from work and was asked to fix the sink.	I was irritated. We just got the sink and it should be working.	I complained. Got my tool box, spent an hour and a half trying to stop the leak.	I wanted the sink to work the way it should.	I called a plumber the next day

The next blog will continue to show you how to understand these journals further and how to lead a counselee to repent of their idols.