

Series: How to Wreck Your Life
Exodus 32:1, 22-24

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“How to Wreck Your Life/Idols”

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I want to begin with a question. How many places of worship do you think there are in this country? We're thinking about places of worship this weekend as ours is getting renovated. So if you don't mind, turn to the person next to you, just take a guess on this one...how many places of worship do you think there are in our country according to the most recent census? Turn to the person next to you; just take a guess on this one. All right, according to the American Religion Data Archives' most recent survey, the number they came up with was 250,402.

Some of you are feeling pretty good right now, but I think you'd have to add a few more. There is a building near here made of steel and glass, and tomorrow morning thousands of people will pour into that building. They will sit behind desks or in offices or cubicles, and some of them will find their ultimate sense of purpose and identity and worth. Some people will sacrifice, in that building, the best of their time, their effort, their emotional well-being, even their families...some will. That's the place where they'll give their hearts. For some people, that building is actually their place of worship. They don't know it, but that's their temple.

There is another building near here where they have a big safe, and in that big, big vault, they keep money. And some people will go into that building, and their primary sense of security and safety comes from how much they have in that vault in that building. And they offer sacrifices because we all...our god is what we sacrifice for. They offer sacrifices on a regular basis to the god in that building.

There is another building not far from here, where all the walls have mirrors, and the priests and priestesses dress in spandex and leotards. And because it's January, that temple has like five times more people than it will in February, and sometimes people are driven to distraction to please that god. Sometimes people get depressed, or have eating disorders, because we're told the way our body looks is...or ought to be...our god. We worship appearance.

For some people, their temple may be a mall or a stadium or a school or a television studio. The number one-rated TV show for the last several years by far...in fact, one television exec says it's the biggest-impact show in the history of TV...is the talent contest for singers. Well, we gave it a really interesting title. It's called *American Idol*.

We're a worshipping people. We can't help it. We all treasure something above anything else in our lives; we just do. We give our devotion to *somebody*. We offer our sacrifices to *something*. We look for the blessed life *somewhere*.

Now, in ancient Israel...in the ancient world...those rival gods were called idols. The gods have not gone away. They have just gotten sneaky. They just get us to sacrifice our lives to them without even knowing

what we're doing. So at the beginning of this series, we're going to look at...*What exactly is idolatry? Like...How do I know what my potential idols are?* Because we all have them. And then, we're going to look at...*Why does the Bible make such a big deal about idolatry? What are the costs of an idolatress life?*

Now, until this message, I had never really done a study of idols in the Bible before. You know, it was amazing this week to realize that the Bible was a book full of...the ancient world was a world like ours, full of idols, and I'll tell you some of the basic ones, just so you know. They'll come up on the screen. Baal, one of the basic idols in the Old Testament, he was the Canaanite god. The word *Baal* just meant *master* or *lord*, and they believed that Baal was the one that ruled over the weather, that brought the rain when it would come...he would produce crops.

Ashtaroth was another...she was actually a goddess, mother goddess, who was kind of regarded as the wife of Baal. In fact, one of the primary practices in Baal worship was temple prostitution because it was a way of trying to get these two gods to give fertility and prosperity to the people who would worship them. And then, there was a god named Marduk. Now, Marduk was the leading god of the Babylon pantheon...not the only one, but the leading one. So when Babylon was a world power, he became kind of regarded as the number one god. He was the lord over rain, troops, war, and interestingly enough, he was the god over accounting. I'm not making that up. They actually had a god of accounting. Every April 15 they would offer a cow...Marduk.

Molech was another idol that you'll read about in the Bible...real, real dark one. Infant sacrifice was particularly connected to Molech. Others as well, but like the prophet Jeremiah says to Israel, "They built high places and sacrificed sons and daughters to Molech...." This really happened.

Dagan was god of the Philistines. Remember the Philistines, Goliath and so? Well, this was their primary god. He was actually regarded as the father of Baal. There is a fascinating story about how the Philistines steal the Ark of the Covenant because they thought there was power there, and this god, Dagan, ends up face down on the ground a couple of days in a row before the Ark of the Covenant.

Then there is another god, Maserati, the god of speed, symbolized by a giant chariot. No, I'm just making that up. There is no god, Maserati, although if you look at a Maserati, its logo is a trident from a statue in Italy of the god, Neptune, stilling the seas.

Idols would be statues. Usually, they were real large to suggest power, beauty, grandeur, very expensive, and usually they would be in the form of either a person or an animal or some combination in order to suggest action, agents. But people, even in ancient times, understood (at least the smart ones did), they knew the statue was not the real god. In fact, after they constructed a statue, it would actually have to have kind of an inauguration ceremony before it went online, before it was activated. Where, by magical rights, its eyes would be opened; its mouth would be energized; it would be given life.

The statue, see, was a way to manipulate spiritual power of that god to get them what they want. It was really about getting, from spiritual powers, what they wanted for their lives. We actually read about one of these kinds of inaugural ceremonies in the Old Testament. Some of you know this story. Moses is on Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments, and he's gone a long time.

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who

brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Amazing, what made people choose to embrace an idol rather than the real God was the real God was making them wait, and they didn't want to wait.

That's the problem with the real God is the real God, you know, his timetable is the timetable that has priority. And hurry and patience will actually incline people to idolatry because with an idol, it's real important you're in charge. Well, Aaron takes their gold jewelry, makes a golden calf, and says, *"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord,"* and the idea is that was going to be ceremony, where the calf would get activated.

Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Anybody here remember, what was the first of the Ten Commandments? *"You shall have no other gods before me."* It was the prohibition of idolatry, and the people are already breaking the very first commandment. And Moses sees his brother, Aaron, is leading the parade, so he reads him the riot act, and Aaron is just a little evasive about this.

Look at what Aaron says: *"Do not be angry, my lord,' Aaron answered,"* laying it on a little thick, *"You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"*

Who would have guessed? See, because we all want to avoid being thought of as idolaters. Now, when we hear the word idolatry, most people think about bowing down to statues. Of course, that doesn't apply to us. But Israel came to understand that even someone who is not engaged in external idolatry may be involved in internal idolatry. This is the real problem...internal idolatry.

God says about the leaders of Israel, *"...these men have set up idols in their hearts."* The real problem isn't a statue in a temple; it's an idol in a heart. Idolatry is when I take anything that isn't God and put it in the place where God belongs. Idolatry is when I look to something that does not have God's power to give me when only God has the power and authority to give. And part of the problem with idolatry is you can take something that's good in itself...money, work, power, even love...but make it an idol when you give it your ultimate devotion, when you put it in the center where only God belongs, when you make it *the* priority of your life.

Paul described it like this that people exchange the Truth of God (that there is one God) for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator. One of the problems in our day is that we think we don't have an idol until our idol gets threatened. And this is a fundamental truth about idolatry: Prosperity tends to mask our idols; crisis tends to reveal our idols. As long as things are going well in my life, I don't think I have an idol problem until there is a crisis, and then all of a sudden I realize, *Man, I've been banking on this idol stuff that no idol ought to be banked on for.*

So I'm not asking in this message *if* we have an idol problem. I'm not asking that because that's just a given. John Calvin said, "The human heart is an idol factory." We live in an idol factory, this part of our world. The real question is...*Which idol is God's biggest rival in my life? In your life?* Because we all got them.

So to start the series, I wanted us to get real clear in a real personal way on our idol problem, so we're going to take an IQ test, okay? Not an intelligence quotient test, an *idolatry* quotient test...what is your

idolatry quotient? Would everybody pull out now...you have some sermon notes in your bulletin, in your program, and you'll need this to take this test. So I'm going to ask if you don't mind doing this, and you can take it home with you. I think this will actually be helpful for all of this at the beginning of this series. Everybody pull out that piece of paper, and then just take out a pen or a pencil, something to write down with. We used to provide pencils in the good old days when we had pews, but they're gone for right now. They will be back, but just pull one out, borrow one from somebody, and actually do this.

Write down...there is going to be two parts to this test...first, we're going to write down what the wannabe idols are in our society that trouble us. So take a pen...we're going to just go through what they are. And then I'll ask some questions to help you figure out which one do you, in particular, personally wrestle with, okay?

So the first wannabe idol in our society is...

1. *Money*...just write down the word *money*. Does anybody have any questions about whether money can be an idol? Paul actually makes this explicit. He warns people in Colossians, "***Therefore put to death...***" and he talks about several problem areas, and the last one he lists is greed, which is idolatry. Money wants to be more than money.

2. *Success*. That's an idol...wants to be one.

3. *Being smart*...being smart. Do you ever hear anybody brag about their degrees or education in this part of the world? That's an idol.

4. *Attractiveness*...attractiveness. And we'll actually spend quite a lot of money, and sometimes go through physical pain for this one.

Number five...this is a little subtle...

5. *Relationship*. A relationship can become a kind of an idol. If I put it in the wrong place in my life or if somebody does that with me, and there becomes this kind of clinging attached to it....

I ran across a book title this week. I don't know if you'll like this or not, but I just thought this was hilarious. I haven't seen the book yet; I just saw the title. The book is called *If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?* I think that ought to be a country western song, don't you think? Doesn't that sound like a country western song...*If You Can't Live Without Me, How Come Your Not Dead Yet?*

When you exist for the approval of another human being, in our day we call that co-dependency. In the Bible, they call it idolatry. See, we have all other kinds of language, but it really gets to the same idea. What happens...how well life gets train-wrecked when there is something in the place where God, alone, ought to be. Sometimes it's a relationship.

6. *Pleasure*. And it really is possible for a human life to be oriented around self-gratification or a buzz, and what that generally is about is kind of a way of medicating or escaping from negative feelings because they become so painful that avoiding them can actually rule somebody's life. In our day, we call that an addiction, but the Bible calls it an idolatry, and so many of the dynamics' diction, see, involve rituals and intense devotion, sacrifice; they will rule a life.

7. *Church*. Ironically, a church or maybe you're reputation for being spiritual or knowing the Bible or something, that can become an idol. It was a big problem in Jesus' day with religious leaders.

8. *Work*. People trash their lives worshipping at that altar.

And then I left I space, and if you think about something else...reputation or something else...then you fill that idol in that you think might be a problem for you. And now, I'm going to ask some questions, and after each of these questions, put a little check mark next to that particular item, that particular god, that you're most tempted to make your idol and see which one of those items gets the most check marks. This is going to be diagnostic for each one of us now...about eight questions I'll ask you.

1. Which of these do I find myself thinking about the most? Look over those eight. Which one of those eight occupies your minds? Because our idols are what we tend to daydream about. We just think about them a lot. Which one of those eight do you think about the most?

2. Which one of those do you most fear losing or feel like life might not be worth living if I did not have this, if I lost that? Which one of those tempts you to feel that way?

3. Which one of these idols most gives me a sense of identity? Which one most makes me feel that because I got *this* or am *this*, I'm *somebody*? Which one of those most gives you a sense of identity?

4. Which of these do I most look to, to make me feel secure? Which one are you most tempted to gain a sense of security from? Put a little check mark next to that one.

5. Which of these eight do I most want to be known for? Again, it could be success or a relationship or having money or something.

I was talking to one of my best friends. I have known this guy for 30 years. We went to grad school together. But we were talking about grad schools we applied to, and I was telling him about one that rejected me, but I implied if I *really* wanted to get into it, I could have gotten into it. Now, why do I do that? Well, I have an idol problem. It's embarrassing and goofy to talk about it, but it's just in me.

6. Again, as you look at those eight, which one of those eight most causes my emotions to go up and down? ...makes me happiest when I have lots of it, makes me saddest when it's threatened. Just put a check mark next to that.

7. Which one of those would other people who know me well say is my most likely idol? Which one of those items of the people who know me...because other people, they see that stuff in me. Well, just put a check mark to it. Which one would other people say is probably your idol?

8. Of those eight, which one do my efforts most tend to revolve around? Because we give our behavior, our actions, toward our ultimate priority. Which one of these do I sacrifice the most for?

Now, hand your paper over to the person next to you, and we'll correct them. No, you don't have to do that. But you might want to talk to somebody about your idol issues. Whichever item has the most check marks clustered around it, just take a look at that for a moment. That's my primary rival for God in my life. We all have that.

Now, over these next four weeks, we're going to look at...*How do we get free from idolatry?* Because idols will wreck your life, and I can't think of anything in this area that seduces people down the road of shipwreck than idolatry. And we're going to look at all idols under the overall categories of money, success, love, and power. We're going to look at how to give our devotion to the one true God. But in the moments left in this talk, what I want to do is look at...*Why does the Bible make such a big deal about idolatry?*

Tim Keller has written a terrific book, and I'm indebted to it for this message and for this series. It's called *Counterfeit Gods*, and he's got a remarkable quote in the book. He says...it's actually from a couple of scholars, biblical scholars..."The central principle of the Bible is the rejection of idolatry." The central principle of the Bible. When you stop and think about it, the first command, "...no other gods before Me," next command, "...no graven image." The primary text of ancient Israel, Deuteronomy 6:4, "**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.**"

And Jesus, when he's asked what's the law about, starts at exactly the same place, "**Love the Lord your God....**" Why does God hate idolatry so much? Well, it's not just because of what idolatry does to God; although, of course, it robs Him of the honor and worship and adoration that He deserves, but God hates it because of what it does to us because it train wreck's life.

Three costs of idolatry...

First, it will cost you God's purpose for your life. If I embrace God, then God sets the agenda for my life. God has a purpose for me. He is deeply concerned about the way I live, but the whole appeal of idolatry is an idol has no agenda for me. If you go back to the ancient world, people outside Israel believed in gods, but they were little, local deities who ruled over little, local tribes. And if you moved to another location, you didn't take your god with you; you worshipped and prayed to the god in that locality. It's kind of like if you live in Green Bay, you route for the Packers; live in Dallas, route for the Cowboys and so. Idols were used to get good crops, fertile cattle, enough rainfall, healthy children. No idol ever gave out Ten Commandments.

Idolatry is an attempt to manipulate spiritual power to get me what I want. Now, in the ancient world, as in ours, people were concerned about right and wrong, and sometimes they would write down things like the Code of Hammurabi, which became fairly famous, but it did not come from a god from an idol. And if you want to think about...you know, we sometimes use the word *pagan* or *paganism*...what's that about?

It's this...that on the one hand, there are standards...right and wrong, good and evil, justice...people have always been concerned about that. But then in paganism, over here, there are gods, but these standards do not come from these gods. In fact, the gods are no better than us. They're just as petty or violent or driven by desires as we are. They're just more powerful, okay? There is this separation, and so I use the gods to get what I want, and that's quite separate from what is right and wrong, what is good and evil.

But then, in this obscure corner of the world, this little insignificant people called Israel said, "No, it is not so." They said, "There is one God, not many gods. And He is the maker of everything that is. He is universal, but it's not just that. He is indescribably good, and everything that we know about goodness and the demand for justice and that longing for the world to be right, it all comes from this God. And He made us, and He loves us."

And so you have these statements from the prophets, like Micah says, *"With what shall I come before the LORD...with burnt offerings?... with thousands of rams?...shall I give my firstborn...?"* Infant sacrifice...that's what people did to the gods to get out of them what they wanted from them. *"And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

This is unprecedented. There is one true God over all the earth. He is deeply concerned with goodness, justice, righteousness. We are loved by Him and accountable to Him, and this revelation that God gave to Israel changed the world. It is called ethical monotheism, and it did not exist before Israel. And because of it, this tiny, insignificant, weak, poor, little country changed everything.

Now, what's interesting is, in the human heart, there is always a tendency to return to paganism and to want a spirituality that will get me what I want without making me accountable for what is right and good and just and holy. There was a widely selling book a few years ago. I won't tell you then name of it, but it was very spiritual, and it was about what was called "the law of attraction." The law of attraction is whatever you think about, you will attract it to yourself. You think about wealth, you'll attract wealth. Think about happiness, you'll attract happiness. Think about disease, you'll attract disease. Whatever you think about, it's like a law of the universe...you'll attract it.

Now, I think that book was well intended. There is a certain kind of truth in that idea, but here's what you will not read. You will not read, "What does the law attraction require of you, O man? That you do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before the law of attraction." See, the law of attraction is not personal. It makes no demands, and there is kind of a vague spirituality floating around us all over the place. And it is pagan because the idea of it is that there is a kind of secret spiritual power in the universe, and it's available for you to use to realize your agenda. But an idol cannot tell me my purpose because an idol didn't make me, cannot hold me accountable, cannot bring justice to the world.

I was made to worship love and follow in the ways of this God, and idolatry will cause me, will cause you, to miss out on the purpose for which you were created. That's part of why the Bible makes such a big deal about the tragic results of idolatry.

Another cost...your idol will exhaust you. Your idol will exhaust you. I tell you what I think the primary demand of most idols in our day is...*Thou shalt perform*. We live under this horrible culture in this era, and I'll bet everybody in the room feels the weight of this. You have to perform. And you feel it at school, and you feel it at work, and you feel it at home, and our kids feel it.

I must have a perfect home with décor and color and feng shui that expresses my inner beauty. I must have perfect children, who play perfect t-ball, and get into perfect schools and marry perfect spouses. I must have a perfect marriage celebrated for its casual elegance. I must have a perfect career kept in perfectly manageable boundaries, with a perfectly balanced schedule. I must have a perfect appearance, with a perfect wardrobe under a perfect coiffeur, with perfect volunteer involvement and perfect church participation. And if anybody, including God, thinks I'm not perfect, I cannot rest until I convince them that I really am.

One word for that is...*a bay-area lifestyle*...another is idolatry. Performance will kill you. And our idols (this is how idolatry works) will take more and more and more and give you less and less and less until eventually they take everything and give you nothing. No idol ever said, *"Come to Me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* You know who said that? Take a shot; this is church. You got a real good chance. Who said that? Jesus said that, and He was talking...when Jesus said that...He

was talking to people that had an idol problem and didn't know it. And for a lot of them, their idol was religious performance. He said, "Come to me. Stop trying to perform for God." It'll kill you...whatever your god is. And it's killing people.

And that brings me to the last cost. Idols do not have what you need the most. Idols will cost what you need more than anything else. Misplaced devotion will make you do crazy things with your life. I saw this this week online...a Denver Broncos fan was enjoying himself at a game in a packed, mile-high stadium until he noticed an empty seat down in front. He went down and asked the guy next to it if he knew whose seat it was. The guy said, "Yeah, that's my wife's seat. We have never missed a game in 30 years, but now my wife is dead." The fan offered his sympathy, and said it was really too bad he couldn't find some relative to give the ticket to and enjoy the game together. "Oh, no," the guy said. "They're all at the funeral."

That's kind of a sad one when you think about it, isn't it? You know where the word *fan* comes from? It comes from the word *fanatic*, which is from a couple of Latin words... *fanaticus*, which means mad, crazy, and *fanum*, which means temple. And there was actually priests of one of the Roman gods... actually a goddess of war...Bologna, and they would gather in a temple dedicated to her and hacked themselves with axes until the blood flowed to insight a spirit of aggression and frenzying and violence to lead them on to victory in war. They would give their blood for their god, but their god didn't care.

Your idol doesn't care. Idolatry is a form of insanity. You know, there have been idols with swords, spears, tridents, hammers, and helmets. There have been idols on pedestals, idols on mountains, idols on horseback, idols on clouds, idols on shrines. There has never been an idol on a cross. An idol cannot give you what you need most. People sometimes think idols have no power, but they do. Idols have power to make you throw your whole life away serving them. We live in a spiritual universe. What an idol does not have is grace, and that's what I need.

One of the most amazing speeches in history was from the Apostle Paul in the city of Athens where everybody would come from all over the world and bring their gods on a place called Mars Hill, named after one of the gods. There were all these statues and shrines...one god after another. And Paul goes to address the people, and he doesn't blast them.

He says, "I see in every way you are very religious..." because we all are. We worship something. "As I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. What you worship as something as unknown, I am going to explain for there is one God, not a whole pantheon of little gods, and He is not made of silver or gold. He has created everything that is...made you and me...and He is unspeakably good. And when we foolishly gave our hearts to all these other gods, He would not give up on us. But He has revealed Himself through a Man, Jesus, and on the Cross He died for our sins. And in His resurrection, He gave us hope."

And Jesus is still inviting people to give up their idols and follow Him, and He's it. Jesus, alone, is worthy of my whole devotion. He, alone, has the authority to forgive all of my sins. He, alone, has the wisdom to guide my whole life. He, alone, has the power to defeat suffering and death. And we're going to get freed by him through this series.

Would you bow your heads? Let's pray to him now: Heavenly Father, You know the truth about us. We live in an idol factory. Our hearts are idol factories, and now, God, as best we can, we all lay our would-be idols before You. We kneel at Your feet. We want to surrender to You. We want to offer to You our

devotion, our adoration. We do this in Jesus' name, Amen.