

Counterfeit Gods

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Romans 1:18-25

Sermon Series:
Gospel in Life

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At a wedding recently, after I pronounced a couple husband and wife, they marched down the center aisle as all couples do, jubilant. Family and friends followed close behind. From my vantage point, I watched the wedding guests file out of the sanctuary. Many of them shared something in common. They were standing in line checking their cell phones. Has it come to this?

Apple sold in one day this week a million pre-orders for its latest iPhone 4S. Mobile mania is sweeping our land. Cell phone use among children is getting younger all time. There are now more cell phones in America than people.

In the Outlook section of the Washington Post last Sunday, there appeared the article, *Steve Jobs and the Worship of Apple*. One sentence caught my attention: “In this secular age, Apple has become a religion and Steve Jobs its high priest.” Steve Jobs appeared before his adoring public to introduce new products much like the pope appears at his Vatican balcony to bless his admirers. People used to line up for hours to hear this secular saint speak. He would stroll onstage like a

Biblical prophet dressed in his signature black turtleneck, Levi jeans and New Balance sneakers. One Mac user said it well: “For me the Mac is the closest thing to religion I can deal with.”

His gadgets promised to take Apple users to a utopian place of computing where everything works and everyone is connected and everyone shares in the same digital spirit. The outpouring of grief following the premature death of this gadget messiah has been nothing short of extraordinary. Apple product fans have been turning out in droves to express their affection. Outside the Apple store in Tysons Corner was this note left with a bouquet of flowers addressed to Steve Jobs: “You changed my life. I love you.”

Now, to be fair, such adulation is not unique to Apple users. I witnessed a comparable outpouring of devotion in the baseball playoffs this week. This allegiance will be on prominent display at FedEx field today when the Redskins battle the Philadelphia Eagles.

Everybody worships something. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was eclectic about religion, wrote: “The gods we worship write their names on

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our faces; be sure of that. And a man will worship something....That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

Emerson is right—a man will worship something. We are worshipping creatures; that’s how we are made. God made us for worship. Maybe it strikes you as self-serving for God to create us this way. Since God cannot give us anything beyond Himself, He gives us Himself to worship.

Worship derives from an old Anglo-Saxon word “worth-scipe” meaning to ascribe worth to something. Worship ascribes worth to someone or something. We worship God because God is worthy. But mark my word, if we do not worship God, we will worship something else. The world is a proverbial Vanity Fair, as John Bunyan described it in *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

We’re engaged in an eight-Sunday *Gospel in Life* sermon series, using a book by Pastor Tim Keller as our study guide. So far, we’ve examined the themes of city—the place where we live—and heart—the place where God intends to live. We come today to the subject of idolatry, which threatens to undermine the place where we live and the heart where God dwells.

Idolatry figures prominently in Scripture. When Moses went to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, people became impatient and constructed a golden calf to worship. Some of us write off idolatry as so Old Testament. I wouldn’t be so sure.

Idolatry is a Greek word meaning phantom or ghostlike. Idols have the appearance of being real, but lack substance or essence. Idols are false saviors; counterfeit gods, you might say. Idols counterfeit aspects of God’s identity and character to win our affection.

Idols are so seductive. They make false promises to make us feel secure and significant. If only I get a large enough IRA, I will be secure. If I get certain people to like and respect me, then my life will count for something.

Psalm 115 has this to say about idols: “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel, feet but do not walk....”

Idolatry is not merely an Old Testament phenomenon. Paul addresses idolatry in his New Testament letters. He writes in Romans 1:23, “They have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal human

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beings or animals.” They transfer worship to gods of their own making. He continues in 1:25, “They worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.” They worship what they have made rather than the One who has made them.

Why on earth would anybody do this? It may have something to do with control. When we worship what we have made, we can more easily manipulate and control our counterfeit idols. We like idols to do our bidding. We can’t bear the thought of relinquishing control, even to a higher power.

The first two of the original Ten Commandments deal with idolatry. Consider the first command: “You shall have no other gods before me” or the second: “You shall not make for yourself any graven image.” One-fifth of these Ten Commandments address the subject of idolatry.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther called idolatry the “original sin.” He identified idolatry as the gateway sin to breaking all the other commandments. Let’s say a man cheats on his income tax return. Why would he do thus? Well, you say, because the man is a sinner. Yes, but why does he sin this way? Luther’s answer is that he cheats because he is making money and possessions—and the status and comfort he derives from

them—his idol. Money becomes his counterfeit god.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with money. Idolatry not only makes bad things into good things; idolatry makes good things into ultimate things. Even good things become idols when we allow them to rule our lives. We look to food to comfort us, sex to satisfy us and money to make us feel secure. Idolatry is the wrong way to meet legitimate needs. Neil Williams, in his book *Gospel Transformation*, supplies this definition: “An idol is anything we believe we need, apart from Jesus, to make us happy, satisfied and fulfilled.”

If you are ready and willing today to dethrone your counterfeit gods, I ask you to do three things. First, we need to name our idolatry. We can make an idol out of anything: a relationship, a friendship, family, status, pleasure or success. Ask God to help you recognize your counterfeit gods. David Powlison asks, in his provocative article, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*: “Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken title to your heart?” Be honest. Who rules your behavior, the Lord or a substitute? Who, other than the true God, is your God? What do you run to for comfort and happiness?

Some of you will resist this exercise. You’ll resist it for

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one simple reason: denial. I don't have a problem with (fill in the blank). Even though everybody else sees it, we refuse to acknowledge it.

On every Great Banquet weekend, we ask every participant three questions. What you think about? Where do you spend your money? How do you spend your time? Our thought life, spending habits and time management show us what we ultimately value.

Tim Keller's diagram on page 43 identifies 20 possible idols for our consideration. Here's a representative sample. My life has meaning and worth if I have influence over others is power idolatry. My life will have meaning and worth if people are dependent on me and need me is helping idolatry. My life will have meaning and worth if I am highly productive and getting a lot done is work idolatry. My life will have meaning and worth if I have attained a certain measure of wealth and financial freedom is materialism idolatry. My life will have meaning and worth if I have a particular look or body image is image idolatry.

The first step in dethroning our counterfeit gods is to identify them. The second step is to confess them to God. I would advise that you involve one other person in this confession. Pick out a trusted friend or family member, a pastor or church leader. Tell them where

you are struggling and ask them to join you in prayer for their release. James writes, "Confess your faults to one another and prayer for one another, that you may be healed" (5:16).

Maybe you've heard the expression, "Confession is good for the soul." There's a word missing from the original 1641 version of this Scottish proverb, "Open confession is good for the soul." Confession brings what is secret into the open. As long as something is hidden, it exercises mastery over us. Once we bring it forward, we unmask it and shrink it in importance.

You may be thinking, I could never confess my counterfeit gods to someone else. Open confession is not only good for your soul; it will bless the recipient of your confession. The person you take into your confidence is struggling with his or her own counterfeit gods. Your initiative may invite this fellow believer to join you in confession.

First, we identify our idols. Second, we confess them. Third, we redirect our worship to God. Only God can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. These counterfeit gods cannot possibly give us the satisfaction we're seeking.

Jesus Christ powerfully meets people who are honest with themselves and willing to ask for help. If this sermon is speaking into your life, I invite

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you to do something about it.
If you are ready to lay down
your idols and follow Jesus
Christ as Lord, I invite you to
stand during our closing prayer.
Other people will be praying,
so you can be discreet about it.
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