

Bent Heart Strings

Dear Friend,

A hammer is a tool that has a particular purpose. It functions best at hammering things. It can be used to dig holes, but it's not very good at it. A shovel is the better tool for digging holes. The hammer works really well at driving nails into wood. A shovel is not so great at driving nails but can be used in a pinch. The heart is the tool God gave mankind to worship and glorify Him. When I use the word heart, I don't mean the beating organ in your chest that pushes blood throughout your body. The biblical understanding of the word heart is the essence or soul of a person. The heart is what drives us, directs our pleasures and fears and makes us unique.

God gave each of us a heart, because He wants a relationship with us. The Bible is like an instruction manual to our hearts. The Creator of all hearts graciously and lovingly inspired men thousands of years ago to write down His instruction for the heart. The Bible also describes God, exposes why the world is the way it is and gives hope by pointing to Jesus Christ as savior. To understand the heart of mankind, we need to understand idols and the danger they pose.

Today, we are going to take a sharp look at idols and how they impact our hearts. Often the word idol conjures up the wrong idea in the modern mind. When I say the word idol, you may think of a small statue or image of a foreign god made of gold, silver or wood. The Bible does mention idols like that, but the reason God prohibits making images of foreign gods is different than you may imagine. It is not the object or image itself that concerns God, but the state of our hearts when we worship anything other than Him.

In Ephesians 2:1-5, Paul says it this way, **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of**

his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

People worshiped other foreign gods not because they loved them, but because they believed they could get something from them. They believed if they offered an animal to the goddess of fertility, their wife would give birth to a son. God wants us to obey and worship Him. Sin is rebelling against God’s will. You and I are created to worship God, but because of sin we worship ourselves. Because of sin, our bodies and minds are bent toward self-worship. All of humanity has this heart sickness. All are dead in their sins apart from Jesus Christ. In our very nature, we deserve God’s wrath, but God loves us too much to leave us dead. Our Creator gave us life in the embodied form of Jesus, who died in our place!

So in this beautiful passage, we see both the true nature of idols and the true power of God’s grace. Idolatry is something we are all guilty of. We don’t bow before gold or silver images of gods anymore, but we are still guilty of worshiping other things or people before God. Money, sex, security, power, fame, relationships, guns, coffee, drugs, alcohol and control are just a few of the gods we worship in the US. All of these things are good in their right place, but our hearts are quick to exalt them as gods. The analogy of a tree is used quite often in the Bible and it is very helpful in understanding idols.

A tree is composed in three major sections: the roots, the trunk and the leaves and fruit. You can’t see most of the roots of a tree, because they are deep underground. The life of the tree is very dependent on the health of the roots. You can cut a tree down, leaving the stump and if the roots are healthy, the tree will grow again. Healthy roots draw clean, pure water from the ground. In the same way, what you worship and believe in shapes how healthy you are. Your heart is not visible in the same way your body is, but you know it’s there because it shapes how you act, think and feel.

The trunk of the tree holds up the branches, leaves and fruit. What we worship produces our actions, thoughts and habits. The fruit or flower of the trees

are what make them valuable or desirable. If the fruit is rotten or diseased, the tree gets cut down. If the fruit is sweet and plentiful, the tree is saved. In the same way, if we worship God we produce fruits of righteousness and life. If we worship idols, we produce fruits of wickedness and death. Adam and Eve rebelled against God when they ate fruit from the forbidden tree. Every single person born after them has their hearts bent on idolatry.

The Bible is chalk full of descriptions of hearts bent away from God. Solomon, king David's son, is recognized in the Bible as the wisest man to ever live. He wrote much of the book of Proverbs and amazed everyone with his vast knowledge. Solomon was also one of the wealthiest men to ever live. He made silver as common as stone and the value of gold decreased in Israel because it was so common. However, despite his vast wisdom and wealth, Solomon turned his heart away from God in his old age. 1 Kings 11:1-4 says, **“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”**

This is a clear picture of the destructive nature our hearts bent on evil. Solomon, in all of his wisdom, chose to disobey God's instruction to not intermarry with the other nations. His heart was turned from God by his many wives. They convinced him that serving only the God of Israel was silly. Because of Solomon's sin, he failed to prepare his son to lead Israel in the correct way. I myself have experienced the bitter fruit of idolatry.

As I grew up, I began to idolize food. I would often snack throughout the day. Comfort food began to dominate my life. I would eat, not because I was hungry but because it felt good. I gained a lot of weight and I had severe acne problems because of my food choices. This resulted in others mocking me for my weight and bad skin. This abuse would make me want comfort and I would turn to

food for that comfort. This vicious cycle continued for years and honestly, I didn't really desire to break it. I was comfortable in my misery. I was worshipping the comfort snacking gave me far more than the God I was created to worship and said I believed in. One summer, at the age of 13, my parents sent me to work for my grandparents on a farm. The hard work forced me to focus on something other than food. Over 3 months, I developed new eating habits just by the nature of the work I did. I felt much better about my body and my ability to work hard. After that summer I spent more of my energy on other things than snacking on comfort food. My point is, sin bends our hearts to worship something or someone other than God. The fruits of that worship are often destructive and deadly.

The Jews believed that righteousness came from obeying the law exactly. There are 613 laws in the first 5 books of the Bible. In addition to those laws, the Jews added more laws passed orally from generation to generation. During the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were very passionate about obeying all of these laws as strictly as possible. This group policed the people of Israel, commanding complete obedience to the law. Jesus often challenged their understanding of the law, and that was one of the main reasons they wanted to put him to death.

In the gospel of Matthew Jesus taught by saying, **“Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”** Then the disciples came to him and asked, **“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”** He replied, **“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”** Peter said, **“Explain the parable to us.”** **“Are you still so dull?”** Jesus asked them. **“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them”** **Matthew 15:10-20.**

One of the unwritten laws the Pharisees strictly enforced was washing your hands with ritually clean water before eating. What Jesus is saying is that strict obedience to the law is not what purifies a person. Instead, Jesus says that our hearts are what defile us. Without a changed heart, we will always naturally sin. This is a really hard teaching to accept. We all want the equation of righteousness. We want the “If I do this or give this then God must do this or give this” equation. The Latin phrase to say this is “Do ut des.” It means, “I give so that you give.” This is exactly what idols promise our hearts. They promise to give us things if we worship them. Drugs, alcohol and sex promise pleasure. If you worship at their altars, you get the promised pleasure all right, but bitter fruit always follows. Money, possessions and fame promise friends, security and control. If you worship at their altars, you may get what they promise, but broken relationships and loneliness always follow. Jesus’ point in this passage is so profound: it is not what you do that purifies you, but who you worship. Anyone who would really be pure before God must worship His Son for what he has done.

Idols are very common in our present age. They may not be obvious like a metal image or statue made of stone, but they are still quite deadly. James instructs the church by saying, **“When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:13-15).**

We may try to blame God for the temptations of our hearts, but God does not tempt anyone. The progression of idolatry is this: first, we give in to our evil desires, then we sin and finally we experience physical and spiritual death. This is the final bitter fruit of idolatry. Praise God, He has given us grace to escape from death. Jesus Christ experienced the death you and I deserve. He paid the final price for sin and death and was resurrected in power and glory. When we believe in Jesus and worship him with our whole hearts, we receive justification from our sin once and for all. This belief and worship produces sanctification now while we live on earth. Our hope in Jesus Christ is that we will experience glorification after death. The progression of idolatry has no hold on the life of believers. We are set

free from the enslavement of our fleshly hearts. In Jesus Christ, we no longer live in fear of death and judgment.

I don't know where this message finds you on your walk with Christ. If you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, don't wait any longer. You can be set free from the enslavement of your idols. Remember, idolatry always produces the bitter fruit of death and destruction. If you do believe in Jesus and are struggling with sin, remember that God is gracious. You have been set free from the cycle of sin and death. Don't trust in your own strength to struggle with sin alone. Rely on God's strength and His people to walk with you through the progression of sanctification. You were made to produce fruits of righteousness from the root of Jesus Christ. You were not made to worship anyone or anything other than the Creator. If you have questions about this topic or prayer requests, please reach out to us. We would love to pray with you over the struggles you are facing. May the Lord God bless you and keep you and your family safe.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chris A Rice". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Chris Aaron Rice