

Strong in the Broken Places

4. Accept No Substitutes

August 8, 2021

Text: Ezekiel 14:1-11

Some companies don't produce their own products. They just make cheap, knockoff copies of other brands, and the results can be pretty funny. [Photos shown on the screen.] For example:

If you're looking for an operating system for your computer, how about -- **Michaelsoft Binbows?** Maybe not. Need shoes? You could get a deal on -- **Mike.** They want to be like Nike. Your kids might like playing with -- **SpecialMan.** He's not super, but his mom always told him he was special. Or you could stop in for some -- **Sunbucks coffee.** Well, the sun technically is a star! Or grab a bite at -- **KFG.** And finish your meal with a few -- **Borios.** They're like Oreos only more boring.

Knockoffs might be cheap, but that doesn't mean they're a good deal. They're going to be poor quality and let us down. Sunbucks coffee won't taste like Starbucks. KFG might stand for Kentucky Fried Goat, who knows? The substitute is never as good as the real thing. And that's true spiritually, too.

In the book of Ezekiel, we see the prophet Ezekiel warned the Israelites about knockoff gods. Substitute gods are called "idols." Ezekiel had been delivering God's message to the Israelites who were living in exile in Babylon. One day some of the Jewish leaders came to Ezekiel and asked him for God's guidance. God tells Ezekiel, **Ezekiel 14:3** *Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?*

Living in Babylon, the Israelites were surrounded by idols. The Babylonians worshipped over 300 different gods, and they were part of the fabric of life. The Jews couldn't go anywhere without seeing a temple to a god or talk to any Babylonian without hearing a reference to a god. Everyone in Babylon worshipped these gods and believed that daily life was impacted by them.

Do you need your crops to grow? Then make a sacrifice to the goddess Antum. She takes care of that. Are you sick? Sacrifice a goat to Ninazu, the healing god. That should do it. Want that woman to fall passionately in love with you? That's Ishtar's department. Make a sacrifice to her. When babies died after childbirth, everyone knew it was the work of the goddess Lamashtu. If you need protection from her, make sure to worship Pazuzu because he can keep her away from you. You get the idea. There was a god for everything.

So, the Israelites were surrounded by idols and people who worshipped them. But that wasn't the problem. God said **the problem was that the elders had set up idols in their hearts. They had allowed what was around them to take root in them.** That's crazy when you remember that idol worship was the reason the Israelites were in Babylon in the first place.

For hundreds of years, God told the people, "If you keep on worshipping idols, I'll exile you from the land." They kept on doing it, and eventually, the Babylonians invaded Israel and took them captive back to Babylon.

For a long time I wondered, why couldn't the Israelites stop worshipping idols? Out of the top ten commandments, "no idols" seems to me like the easiest one to keep. I've never been tempted to sacrifice an animal on an altar to a pagan god. God didn't have to rebuke Israel for stealing, or lying, or committing adultery, or coveting. They seemed to have a handle on those. But when it came to worshipping idols, the Israelites just couldn't stop it. They were addicted. Why? Partly because everyone else [worshipped idols, too.]

The Jews were slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years, and the Egyptians worshipped idols. When they lived in the Promised Land, all the nations around them worshipped idols. The Babylonians worshipped idols. For centuries, everyone around them worshiped idols. It's hard to go against the grain.

A bigger reason Israel worshiped idols is that *it felt like a risk not to*. Three thousand years ago, a good harvest was a matter of life and death. People needed the rain to fall and the crops to grow or they would die in agony from starvation. For thousands of years, everyone around them believed that a good harvest came from pleasing the god who controlled the rain and the harvest. So, the average Jewish farmer would say to himself, "I know Moses said that the God who brought us out of Egypt commanded us to worship only him, no idols. But I don't want my family to starve to death. So, I will worship him like I was taught. But just in case there is a god of the harvest like everyone says there is, I'll also sacrifice to him, just to cover my bases. After all, can all those other nations be wrong?" The prophets said, "Don't do it!" But sacrificing to the idols seemed like a safe thing to do.

Or another example -- if a couple desperately wanted a child to carry on their lineage and provide for them, they'd pray to the God of Moses. But just to be on the safe side, they'd also sacrifice to the pagan god of fertility. Plus, the husband didn't mind visiting the ritual prostitute at the shrine and telling his wife it was for the family's sake.

Idol worship hasn't gone away. It's just changed outward form. We Americans don't sacrifice sheep to statues. But idol worship is still running rampant. It can be tempting to turn to something other than the true God for what we consider essential to life. That's because human nature has not changed. It's been said, "The human heart is an idol factory." We don't make statues and call it a god, but we make gods in other ways.

It's not hard to make your own god. I can tell you how to do it in just a couple simple steps. Here's how. First, identify something good that you want in life. Maybe it's a successful career, or financial security, or comfort, or friends, or family. It could be any good thing. Once you've identified that good thing, the next step is to *make it ultimately important*. Make it the center of your life. Convince yourself that it will give you significance, security, safety, or fulfillment if you just get enough of it. And voila -- you've got yourself an idol. Easy.

You see, an idol is anything we seek to give us what only God can give. God told Ezekiel that the elders of Israel had set up idols in their hearts. It's easy to spot an idol on an altar. It's harder to detect an idol in the heart. So, here are a few questions that can help us detect idols which may lurk in our hearts. You can call this a --

Heart scan for unrecognized idols:

1. Where do I look for security, joy, and significance?

In Ezekiel's time, people worshipped idols to assure them enough food, enough safety, and to generally make them happy. When we take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing, then it becomes an idol. How would you complete this sentence: "I'll be happy as long as I have ____"? Fill in the blank. What do you need so deeply that you can't imagine a fulfilled life without it? Good things become idols when we depend on them to give our lives meaning or security that only God can. Then they become substitutes for God, and they will always disappoint us in the end.

Money is a good thing, but when we view it as the source of our security, it becomes an idol. Sex is a good thing created by God to enrich marriage. But when we believe we can't live a meaningful life without it, it becomes an idol. Power and influence can be used for good. But when we need it to feel worthwhile, it's an idol.

Tim Keller writes that after the global economic crisis began in mid-2008, there was a tragic string of suicides of people who had been wealthy and well-connected. The acting chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, he hung himself in his basement. The chief executive of Sheldon Good, a leading U.S. real estate auction firm, shot himself behind the wheel of his red Jaguar. A French money manager who had invested the wealth of many of Europe's leading families in a Ponzi scheme and lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money. He slit his wrists and died in his Madison Avenue office. A Danish senior executive with HSBC Bank hanged himself in the wardrobe of his £500-a-night suite in London. When Bear Stearns collapsed, an executive learned that he would not be hired by JPMorganChase, and he took a drug overdose and leapt from the 29th floor of his office building.¹ Money, success, and reputation had become idols that these men couldn't live without.

Christopher Wright said, "The Old Testament points out that the worst thing about idols is that they are utterly useless when you need them most."² Idols leave us disappointed in the end. Whatever we turn to other than God will be insufficient to sustain our lives. Nothing other than God can sustain the weight of our souls.

2. What stirs my deepest emotions? Ezekiel knew that being a prophet was a dangerous occupation. People killed prophets because when their idols are challenged, people get emotional and violent. You've heard the phrase "Follow the money"? If we want to detect idols, follow the emotions. We can sense an idol when our emotions rise and become strongest.

¹ Keller, Timothy. *Counterfeit Gods* Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Christopher J. H. Wright, "Editorial: 'All Our Gods Have Failed,'" *Themelios* 18, no. 3 (1993)

Back in 1984, I was in my second year as a pastor, serving a small country church. I attended a retreat with about 400 other United Methodist pastors. One night, we had a talent show, meant to be a fun time. I decided to enter it. I had a degree in music, and I chose to play a very difficult classical piano piece by Rachmaninoff. But, since I'd left school, I hadn't been practicing enough to stay sharp. I ended up not playing it very well. And afterwards, I felt terrible. I wanted to crawl in a hole and not come out. The intensity of my feelings surprised me. I remembered it for years. As I wondered why, I realized that I was counting on my piano playing to make my new colleagues notice and respect me. The opinion of others was an idol for me, and I didn't realize it until my intense emotions tipped me off. Then I was able to tear down that idol.

To detect an idol, pay attention to what makes you most emotional. What stirs your passions the most? It might not be the opinions of others. It might be something else. For some, it might be political ideology. Obviously, political passions are running very high today. It's interesting that as religious affiliation has declined in the U.S., ideological intensity has risen. For many, politics has become their new religion.³ Many people get more passionate about their politics than they do about knowing God. Their political ideology guides what they do and think more than Jesus does. They believe their political ideology is a more powerful change agent than the Gospel. But as one writer said, "Politics was never a hope worthy of our faith. It now has become an idol that steals it." Talking about specific idols can be kind of risky because we protect our idols. And that's behind the third question.

3. What do I protect most fiercely? Ezekiel discovered what all prophets know: when you point out idols, people get very touchy. They don't want anyone messing with their source of security and meaning. Let's try this. Take out your wallet and hold it in your hand. Go ahead, I'll give you a few seconds. I'm not going to, but how would you feel if I asked you to give it to a person in the next row? (I heard Pastor John Ortberg did that once, which is why I won't!) Some of you wouldn't care because you pay with your phone. But you get my point. "In God We Trust" is printed on the top of our bills. It's there as a reminder because when we've got money, that's when we are most likely to trust it instead of God. Maybe money doesn't trigger your protective instincts. Maybe it's something else. What do you reflexively protect in your life? It might not be an idol, but that's one of the signs.

4. What do I sacrifice for? In biblical times, people offered valuable things like livestock or grain to their idols. Tragically, some idol cults even demanded human sacrifice. Idols will always make you sacrifice for them. Our sacrifices look different today. Someone works inhuman hours and sacrifices relationships with their spouse and family because that's what it takes to get ahead. The god of success demands a sacrifice. Or we see someone pursue their addiction so much that they lose their job

³ America without God by Shadi Hamid *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>

and their health. They are sacrificing to the idol. We see a seemingly perfect marriage collapse as one of partner walks out in pursuit of a new spark. The god of romance demands constant sacrifice. Is there a place you feel pulled to cut corners or make excuses? What are you sacrificing to other than God?

The best way to recognize a counterfeit is to know the real thing. The cure for idolatry is to focus on knowing the true, living God. It's no coincidence that the book of Ezekiel starts with a vision of the living God. After seeing the real God, Ezekiel couldn't bear the knockoff idols. In **Ezekiel 14:6**, God tells the people to repent for worshiping idols – to transfer their hopes, dreams, passions, and loyalty from the idols around them to the true God who created them. And God said that when the people would do that -- **Ezekiel 14:11** *Then the people of Israel will no longer stray from me, nor will they defile themselves anymore with all their sins. They will be my people, and I will be their God, declares the Sovereign LORD.*” By giving up idols, the people would have a pure heart, committed to the true God. They would give God the glory which belongs to him. They would trust God for their future, to take care of their families, to give their lives meaning. They would trust him for their deepest needs and discover what it means to live by faith, see the power of God at work, and to know him personally.

The very earliest statement of faith for the New Testament church was three simple words: “Jesus is Lord.” “Lord” means master, head over all. If Jesus is Lord, that means no one else is. The Romans said, “Caesar is Lord.” But the Christians said, “Caesar might be the head of the government, but Jesus is Lord of my life and Lord of all.” To be a Christ-follower was to change the allegiance of their lives. Instead of turning to money, sex, or power for security or meaning, they now turned to Jesus. And **Philippians 2:10-11** reminds us *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*“