

Counseling Those with *Lust, Idolatry or Worldly Affection*
Counseling 201 // **Class Six** // April 29, 2018 // James 4:1-10

*What causes arguments and conflicts between you? Is it not (the things you want too much)
which wage war in your members? James 4:1 (Revised John Version)*

- I. Idolatry** **James 4:1-10**
- A. The Problem – *My Lusts* (vv. 1-6)
1. The cause of conflict (v. 1)
 2. You do not have (vv. 2-3)
 3. Adulteresses (loving something not yours) (v. 4)
 4. God is jealous (v. 5)
 5. God is gracious (v. 6)
- B. The Proper Response – *My Lord* (vv. 7-10)
1. Submit (v. 7a-8a)
 - a. Submit to God (v. 7a)
 - b. Resist Satan – he will flee (v. 7b)
 - c. Draw Near God – He will draw near (v. 8a)
 2. Repent to God (v. 8b)
 - a. Cleanse your hands, sinners (v. 8b)
 - b. Purify hearts, double minded (v. 8c)
 - c. Mourn (v. 9)
 3. God will exalt you (v. 10)
(Cf. Matthew 5:4; Isaiah 66:2)
- C. Ed Welch: *When People are Too Big and God is Too Small*, “As in all idolatry, the idol we choose to worship soon owns us. The object we fear overcomes us. Although insignificant in itself, the idol becomes huge and rules us... (but) the whole strategy backfires. We never expect that using people to meet our desires leaves us enslaved to them.”
- D. This shows up in counseling **when we get into conflict because things we want become more important than love**. They become more important than **self-control**. They become **important enough for us to sin** in order to get it.
- E. REPENTING: When we repent of our *idols*, we do not mean chubby gold-colored men sitting cross-legged, but desires that may appear innocent enough have become (often without our knowing it) more important to us than knowing or pleasing God. Idols have three common qualities:
1. They satisfy the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and/or the boastful pride of life;
 2. They reflect our desire for immediacy and control over trust and obedience;
 3. They are often good things if received as a gift and not clutched onto to represent life to us.

II. How Can I Find My Idols?

- A. Please realize that in every *expressed biblical case*, an idol is a real thing – **like a statue** – representing a real being. The word idol is not in the Bible used to refer to things we may very much want in the way we are using the term. **However, Colossians 3:5.**
- B. As we use the term, “lusts” (Idols) are things – *sometimes good things* – we put in God’s place. “God’s place” means things we feel we need. They may be things we want with all our heart, things we fear enough that our thoughts, attitudes or feelings are controlled by them. These *lusts* are things we will sin to avoid or get. A mature and victorious Christian life is **ultimately about learning to recognize Christ as Lord** in all our life and **repenting of everything else we have trusted, loved or required** but Him.
- C. John Piper writes in a good article entitled *Discerning Idolatry in Desire* (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/discerning-idolatry-in-desire>), “Most of us realize that enjoying anything other than God, from the best gift to the basest pleasure, can become idolatry. Paul says in Colossians 3:5, “Covetousness is idolatry.” “Covetousness” means desiring something other than God in the wrong way. But what does that mean—“in the wrong way”?

The reason this matters is both vertical and horizontal. Idolatry will destroy our relationship with God [and] our relationships with people.” Here are five of the 12 characteristics Piper uses to determine idolatry:

1. Enjoyment is idolatrous when its worth is significantly < than it is wanted;
 2. Enjoyment is idolatrous when not permeated with gratitude.
 3. Enjoyment is idolatrous when it is not clearly seen that it is to be loved less than God.
 4. Enjoyment is idolatrous when it seems like a right and its delight a demand.
 5. Enjoyment is idolatry when it draws us away from our duties.
- D. Piper also wrote a wonderful poem about idolatry to his son on the eve of his wedding. It is called *Love Her More and Love Her Less*. You can find it at <http://www.desiringgod.org/poems/love-her-more-and-love-her-less>
- E. Examples of common idols include (but are not limited to):
1. Financial security;
 2. Academic, social and sports success of our children;
 3. Our physical appearance and the appearance of our family members;
 4. Our recognition, respect or position;
 5. Good health;
 6. Food, comfort or ease from strife;
 7. Happy marriage;
 8. Being loved, known, wanted and included.

III. Discussion - What Does Idolatry Look Like? (CASE STUDY)

Jessica is 17 and her sister Kirsten is 15. Best friends since they were little, they can be a tough team for their parents Joe and Sharon. Jessica and Kirsten have perfected the art of disgusted looks, logical argument, emotional pleading and sulking. Sometimes their parents give in just to not have to go through their tirade.

Jessica and Kirsten are invited to Sierra's parents' beach house this weekend. The problem is Joe and Sharon don't really know Sierra's family. The girls have brought the invitation up several times and their parents keep saying they'll soon discuss it.

One night when their parents were watching the late news, the girls asked again about the weekend. "We'll decide and get to you tomorrow after dinner," her dad said.

Unable to wait any more, Jessica blurted out, "What's the big issue? Don't you trust us? You afraid we're gonna get drunk or have boys over? We're not doing anything but hanging out. Sierra's parents will be there. Besides, you can't totally protect us all the time – we're growing up and should have some freedom to go along with our age."

"Well, honey..." began Sharon.

"What do you think Sierra's parents are like, anyway? Do you think they don't have any standards? They're good people. I wish you wouldn't judge them before you even know anything," tag-teamed Kirsten.

"We didn't say you can't go," said Sharon. "We may be fine with it. We just have some questions."

"I don't like your tone and am inclined to say no just because of that," Joe shot back. "Maybe you forget who is in charge."

Rolling her eyes in disgust, Kirsten said, "Oh, right, like we'd really have the chance to do that. You're always reminding us."

"Fine," Joe said. "Then you can stay home with that smart-mouth of yours."

"She's right, Dad!" said Jessica. "You don't listen, you don't let us grow up and you always clamp down on the "respect issue" like we don't know about that."

"Now, Joe," Sharon began. "We haven't heard the girls out yet. Besides, I've heard the Playas are sweet people. Maybe it will be OK."

"I'm not rewarding their mouths," Joe retorted. "They need to learn to mind their manners and position before they get out of this house and we don't have much time."

"You never let us do anything anyway," said Jessica. "We knew what you would say before we even asked." Off she went to her room in a huff, her sister not far behind.

- A. Describe as best you can any idols you saw in this discussion.
- B. What biblical principles undergird these idols in such a way as gives you direction for how you might try to lead them toward repentance?
- C. In what way might the girls be able to preach the gospel to themselves in such a way as would lead to a change in the dynamic here?
- D. In what ways might the parents be able to preach the gospel to themselves such that there would be a change in the dynamic here?
- E. Where in this relationship (with any of the people involved) can you see that people can be affirmed, accepted, and instructed in a different direction than what they are showing? (that is, areas of growth available to them)
- F. What are some "danger zones" in this story? What are things you want to avoid doing or avoid saying?

IV. Homework

- A. Read interview (pages 6-9) with Brad Bigney about his book on Idolatry, *Gospel Treason*. Write down **one or two takeaways that you can share at your table next week.**
- B. Memorize **James 4:1-2**
- C. Interview yourself ☺ - *Ask God to show you what you may idolize.* Write it down and pray each day this week through the James 4:7-9 process. HINT: **It will get in the way of 1 Cor. 13 kind of love and it will get in the way of obeying God.**

I've chosen a few questions you can use for yourselves to **determine lusts, idols or wordly affections.** Most are from David Powlison's article in the *Biblical Counseling Journal* entitled "*Effective X-Ray Questions.*" They help expose the lusts of our heart.

1. *What do you love?*
What do you hate?
What do you most fear?
What brings you greatest joy?
What does it seem like you must have / avoid for life to work?
 - a. Matthew 22:37-39 →
 - b. Luke 16:13-14 →
 - c. 2 Timothy 3:2-4 →

2. *What are your goals and expectations for yourself or your family?*
 - a. Matthew 6:32-33 →
 - b. 2 Timothy 2:22 →

3. *What do you most not want to fail at? Why that?*
 - a. Philippians 3:7-10 →
 - b. Jeremiah 17:1-14 →

4. *Whose opinion of you counts?*
From whom do you most desire approval and fear rejection?
How do you define who you are?

- a. Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 29:25 →
- b. John 12:43 →
- c. 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 →
- d. 2 Corinthians 10:18 →

- D. Idolatry Resources (Recommended by John Morrison)
- 1. *When People Are Big and God is Small* (Ed Welch)
 - 2. *Gospel Treason* (Brad Bigney)
 - 3. *James 4:1-10* (sermon 3/11/18 FBC John Morrison)

Appendix: Biblical Counseling Coalition Interview Q & A with Brad Bigney

<http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/books/interview/gospel-treason>

Below you will find an article interviewing Pastor Brad Bigney of Florence, Kentucky's Grace Community Church. It is the church where Ken and Rosemary Spence's son Brad is on staff as Pastor of Worship Arts. Brad Bigney has ministered to a number of us through his on-line sermons and his lectures at Biblical Counseling Training Conferences some of us have attended and benefited from in Lafayette, Indiana over the past five years.

*This particular interview has to do with the book Bigney released last year, **Gospel Treason**. It deals with a question asked in a learning center class in February (2014). Greg Perkins asked, "John, what do you mean on the notes where you say, 'Lusts have more to do with degree than content.' What does that mean?"*

Although I answered it briefly from James 4, the following article and the book which they discuss answers it at more length. It is an important concept for all believers to understand, and especially those of us who help disciple other people – including even our children and grandchildren.

One other thing: Brad does not in this interview address the role that a healthier view of our identity in Christ plays in fighting idolatry. That is an oversight. While I know that he knows much about our identity in Christ, I do not know if he uses it as much as we encourage our people to do. Weaving that important component of sanctification is very important at all times, and particularly so when dealing with this issue.

John Morrison

BCC Staff: As part of our BCC vision, we want to help you to get to know gifted Christian authors and their books. This week we're highlighting Brad Bigney as he talks about his new book, *Gospel Treason* by P & R Publishing.

BCC: "Brad, thanks for joining us. Your book has a very interesting title. Please share with our readers why you titled the book *Gospel Treason*?"

BB: "Even though the book is about idolatry, I titled it *Gospel Treason* because the heart of idolatry is really that we're turning away from the glory and all-satisfying goodness of what Christ has once-and-for-all done to solve our *biggest* problem, and instead looking to someone or something else in this life to truly satisfy. So it's high treason. It's what Romans 1 talks about when it says we've exchanged the glory of God for something created in this world, and the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:23-25). It's really trying to live on substitutes."

BCC: "What are some of the most common 'substitutes' or idols that Christians are most guilty of?"

BB: "While Christians are certainly capable of stepping into gross sins of every sort, where most Christians get in trouble is in wanting even a good thing too much. The Puritans referred to it as an inordinate affection. What you want is good; you just want it too much. And you've started to build your world and identity around that instead of your Savior and the Gospel."

BCC: “Yes, the Puritans even called it ‘overmuch love.’ What are some examples of these inordinate affections and overmuch love?”

BB: “One of the most common things I run into as a pastor and counselor is someone who desperately wants to have a godly marriage. That’s a great and biblical desire. But our sinful flesh can take that desire and twist it into an ugly demand, so that we start waking up every day with that as our main focus, refusing to please God, or be content, or trust God with anything short of exactly the kind of godly marriage I was hoping for. And it leads to bitterness, depression, and often sinful behavior, as the person begins to shut down, but idolatry is really what’s at the root of it because their sense of joy and well-being is all riding on that one great desire or hope. And so it begins to affect everyone around them—especially those closest to them. Our idols take a huge toll on those closest to us.”

BCC: “Brad, as you know, a very vital question related to this is, ‘Then, is it wrong to have desires? Are desires in themselves automatically sinful?’”

BB: “That’s a great question. No, it’s not wrong to have desires, hopes, and aspirations, but as Christians we need to be conscious of the fact that nothing in this world (even a Christian marriage) will ever fully satisfy; it was not designed to do so. C.S. Lewis said it so well in his great chapter on hope at the end of *Mere Christianity* when he said: ‘*If I find in myself a desire that nothing in this world fully satisfies, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world.*’ Idolatry deceives us into trying to get fully satisfied right here and now, apart from Christ, and it always leads to disappointment and confusion. Marriage, as good as it is, was never designed to fully satisfy you and bear the weight of all your expectations. It can’t. It’ll crumble. Children are a blessing but can never bear the weight of fully satisfying you. Work, hobbies, health, and even ministry opportunities were never designed to fully satisfy you at the deepest level. Only Christ can do that.”

BCC: “Brad, it’s obvious that you are passionate about this subject...”

BB: “This subject more than any other has been one of the great awakenings in my life. My salvation was first, then an understanding of the sovereignty of God over all things was second. And then an understanding of the idols of *my* own heart was a third major breakthrough for me in understanding why I do what I do, and why it’s so hard to consistently put to death certain sins. You see, when you start addressing idolatry, you’re getting after the sin beneath the sin. Idolatry focuses on the heart motivations as to why you do what you do. And most of us live blind to this and self-deceived because Jeremiah 17:9 says the ‘heart is deceitfully wicked and who can know it?’ A biblical understanding of idolatry dramatically changed my life and exposed how far I had drifted from the gospel. Over twenty years ago, an understanding of idols of the heart was a major breakthrough in my own marriage struggles, and the things that I learned about my own heart changed the way I approach life and ministry.”

BCC: “What are some of the reasons why it is so important to talk about idolatry today?”

BB: “The problem of idolatry is not peripheral—it’s central. Anything that prevents the Gospel from having center stage in your life will dramatically affect the way you live and hinder the degree to which you can glorify God, because when the Gospel loses center stage, your spiritual immune system shuts down, leaving you susceptible to so many other sins.

That's why, in 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, Paul stresses the priority of the Gospel when he says, 'Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...'"

BCC: "How would you address those that say idolatry is largely an Old Testament problem?"

BB: "Just consider the last little verse in the New Testament book of 1John. It's worth noting how John ends his letter. After giving us 105 verses on the importance of a warm, loving fellowship with Christ our Savior, how does the apostle of love wrap it all up? He closes in 1 John 5:21, with this sober warning: 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.' Did John lose his train of thought? Is he changing subjects? Not at all. You see, Gospel treason—Gospel drift—inevitably leads to idolatry because our hearts don't just drift aimlessly; the drift is always away from the Gospel, away from our Savior, and into the grip of something or someone else. So, the last line in John's letter leaves us asking the most basic question of all: Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken the title deed of your heart? Does something or someone else hold your heart's trust, loyalty, and desire?"

BCC: "Since Christians know that Bible warns us so often about idolatry, how is it that so many of us can still be so unaware of how often we're moving into it?"

BB: "Idolatry most often flies under the radar. Let me illustrate how this happens. Nobody wakes up and says, 'I'm going to start living for the approval and affection of my husband. Starting right now, this will be my ruling passion, and I will refuse to find comfort in God or His Word until I get the approval and affection from my husband that I crave.' Nobody says that out loud. Yet millions of people—including Christians—live this way without even knowing it. They're trapped and miserable because they have made a functional god of something or someone other than the one true living God, which leads to misery and chaos every time.

And part of what makes this battle so tough is that we don't recognize the idolatry we've bought into. We don't see that we're building our life around an idol (marriage, kids, job, hobbies, etc.), but God does, and He loves us too much to help us chase our idols. In fact, He's a jealous God. That's why He says in Isaiah 42:8, 'I am God, that is My name; and My glory I will not share with another, nor My praise with graven images.'"

BCC: "So what's the biblical process for addressing idols of the heart, for addressing Gospel treason?"

BB: "The answer is not just to say 'No' to idols. It's to cultivate a revival of gratitude for the Gospel because idols struggle to take root in the soil of a grateful heart. Gospel gratitude is the 'weed-be-gone' that can keep our hearts clear of idols that constantly swarming back and forth over the altar of our hearts. And it's a constant battle to stay vigilant. John Calvin got it right when he said, 'The heart is a factory of idols.' That's why redemption and the glory of God are the big themes that run through the Bible. Why? Because God knows we drift and need to be brought back again and again to the Savior, and to the sin-shattering, idol-smashing Gospel.

In *Gospel Treason* I lay out a plan that will help you identify and destroy the idols that keep you enslaved to certain sins in your life, sins that keep you from experiencing Gospel joy and freedom. I want to lead you on a journey that I think will help you pursue holiness and fight sin much more effectively, as you learn to keep the main thing the main thing."

BCC: “Brad, along with *Gospel Treason*, what are some other resources that could help someone who wants to dig deeper into this?”

BB: “If you go to [my website](#) there’s actually a free study guide that you can download that goes along with the book. More than half of our small groups at church have used this as they read and studied *Gospel Treason* together. From the website you can also access a series of messages by the same title that I just completed that complement the book and dig into idolatry further. Some other great books that would add to your understanding are Tim Keller’s *Counterfeit Gods* and Paul Tripp’s *Lost in the Middle*.”

BCC: “Brad, what final word would you like to leave with our readers on this vital subject?”

BB: “A great place to start is to simply pray Psalm 139:23-24, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me...’”

BCC: “Thank you, Brad, for writing this important book and for introducing our Biblical Counseling Coalition readers to it.”
