



The God of Self

Ezekiel #5 | May 19, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | by Steve Howell

Opening

"I Can Do Nothing!"



You should have seen me on Wednesday morning (actually, some of you did!). I was darting back and forth from the tech booth to the back closet behind the worship center, running to my car and to my office, desperately trying to wrap my head around something that I just *could not* understand.

Whether you are hearing me through the sound system currently will tell you whether we figured it out or not, but on Wednesday morning the system most definitely was not working! No sound was coming through the speakers!

And the system failure couldn't come at a less convenient time; no, it happened right as the Genesis Schools were holding their annual "Awards Chapel." Scores of parents and grandparents filled the entire worship center, ready to hear a few lines of praise highlighting their student. All they wanted to do was hear...and no microphone, no instrument, no video would make a sound.

I did all the things I knew how to do. I flipped buttons and switches, I unplugged and plugged cables, I gave stern and pleading looks. When none of that worked, I called for backup, talking to my worship ministry expert/friend who knows how all these things should work. We identified that an issue existed (wow!), but there was no way to fix it in the moment.

I could only shake my head because I was useless.

"I Can Do Everything!"

On many other days, though, I pride myself on being the *solution*! I derive much joy from having the answer to a difficult situation, and many times I get a panicked call from my someone because their _____ (fill in the blank) isn't working.

I love walking in, confidently assessing the situation, and getting the little light bulb to pop on ("DING!") in my brain. I can walk over, click a button here, turn a knob there and... *Voila!* Success!

The accolades pour in. The praise is effusive! The gratitude is palpable!

I can reach around and give myself a pat on the back because *I was a rock star!*

The Identity Crisis



The funny thing about those two opposite experiences is that they both highlight a flaw that I have. Whether I'm bummed out because *I* didn't have the solution, or excited because *I* was the answer, I have a subtle tendency to focus on *me*.

I don't think I'm outwardly proud and self-centered, but I face an ongoing temptation to look at situations through the lens of *Steve*...to think of life only in *my* terms. It's tempting to take situations in my marriage and care more about how *I* am affected. It's tempting to consider issues at church and worry more about how *I* handle them.

Perhaps you've faced some of those same temptations – to make life about *you*.

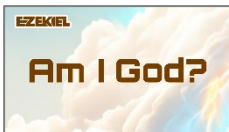
When we do that, we're really answering a question. Few of us would phrase it this bluntly, but really we're just answering the following question: **"Am I God?"**

In other words, am I the focus? Am I the priority? Are my thoughts most important? Are my feelings the most significant?

"Am I God?"

I know the answer to this question might be easy to figure out intellectually (especially if you've ever been in church, ever in your life!), but the answer is hard to live out consistently. The answer makes a huge difference in our own identities and in our own experiences, so we need to get it right.

Can we work on answering the question together?



Idolatry of Self

"Am I God?" The answer is going to be "no," so if you need to leave you can at least leave with the certainty of knowing the conclusion. Yet there is so much more to it.

Let's start with the intellectual answer and then move to the practical.

Idolatry Defined

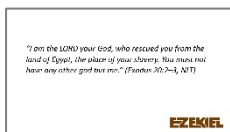
The Ten Commandments give us a solid foundation to start answering the question.

"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me." (Exodus 20:2–3, NLT)

No gods but me. One God alone.

That seems like a solid answer to the question of *"Am I God."* However, despite the clear command from God Himself, you and I (and every other person on this earth) struggle to keep our worship singularly focused. We easily drift into *idolatry*.

What is idolatry, specifically?





Religion Professor Cari Myers from Pepperdine University says that if one does not love God with all that they are, then they are loving an idol. She describes idolatry this way:

“There’s three directions for your love to be pointed at — toward God and God alone, toward other people, and toward yourself,” Myers said. “I feel like idolatry is when we stumble with the first one.”¹

Noted pastor and author Tim Keller writes that idolatry is *“anything more important to you than God,”* or *“anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God.”²*

In other words, idols are things that take the place of God. God should be our One and only God; He should be our priority. Idolatry occurs when we put other things in His place. Some cultures substitute a different deity – an invented idea that people hope will order the world in a way that is more acceptable to them. Other cultures treat other people, other ideas, or other things as if they were gods. And most of us face the temptation to put ourselves on the throne.

Regardless of whether it is real or imagined, a person or a thing, the worship of an idol ultimately prioritizes *my desires* over and above what *God desires* for my life.

The God of Me

When I choose myself and my own ways over God and His ways, then I am engaged in the idolatry of self (a sin historically referred to as “pride”).

“Pride is easier to recognize than to define, easier to recognize in others than in oneself. Many biblical words describe this concept, each with its own emphasis. Some of the synonyms for pride include arrogance, presumption, conceit, self-satisfaction, boasting, and high-mindedness.”³

Regardless of how it is described, Scripture is clear that the temptation to be proud is wrong! In several passages, the Bible repeats this theme:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
(1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6; Proverbs 3:34)

Despite God’s repeated warnings, we continue to elevate ourselves.

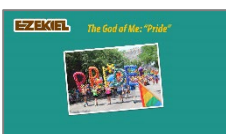
Example: “Pride”

The most blatant example of pride in modern society is... **“pride.”** The rainbow flag is celebrated, and people are encouraged to be “proud” of their sexual identities. They denote “proud” in the sense of “pleased and delighted,” but their “pride” is also an example of the idolatry of self.

¹ [Idolatry of Self: Hurting or Helping Identity - Pepperdine Graphic \(pepperdine-graphic.com\)](http://pepperdine-graphic.com)

² [Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope that Matters](#)

³ Cowen, G. (2003). [Pride](#). In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1327). Holman Bible Publishers.



Author Matthew Roberts writes:

“Pride’ captures the essence of the movement best of all” (p. 49), for to claim that “our sexual inclinations are our fundamental identity is to ascribe to ourselves ultimate significance, to declare ourselves to be our own creators” (p. 46).⁴

Rather than submitting to God’s created order or following His sexual ethic, “pride” suggests that you and I are the final arbiters of what is approved and appropriate. “Pride” says that we get to decide...and no one should be able to tell us differently.

Now, I’m not arguing that personal feelings don’t exist, or that attraction is an easy choice. A man may very well feel like he thinks a woman feels; a woman may very well be attracted to other women.

What I am arguing is that God expects us to *submit our feelings* to Him and to follow Him...even when our feelings want to go the other way. To worship God, you obey Him, not your own feelings!

“And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments.”
(1 John 2:3, NLT)

But most in the LGBTQ+ community (falling in lockstep with most of the straight community) claim that their feelings don’t just *exist* – they claim that their feelings are *more important* than anything God commanded.

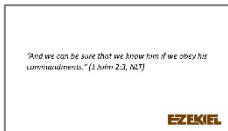
- The Bible says marriage is for one man and one woman for life...BUT I WANT marriage to be less restrictive.
- The Bible says physical intimacy is reserved for marriage...BUT I WANT to be intimate without those constraints.
- The Bible says physical intimacy excludes certain behaviors...BUT I WANT to practice intimacy differently.

Pride can’t obey God, because to obey God would mean rejecting our own preferences. The “god of self” simply will not comply.

“We have ultimate significance,” it says.

Consequently, refusal to affirm someone else’s preferred living arrangement is heresy against that god of self. Refusal to use someone else’s preferred pronouns amounts to blasphemy against the god of self. Insistence on discussing these issues in terms of sin (God’s term) is sacrilege against that god of self.

That’s why people argue with such intensity when confronted on these personal matters. If your divinity is at stake, you fight back.



⁴ [Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self – A review – TheWeeFlea.com](#)

Example: "Fame"



But lest you think that the "god of self" is limited to sexual sin, please know that pride is everywhere. It competes for attention in other places, such as in the pursuit of **fame**.

Influence and fame aren't wrong in and of themselves. In Genesis 12, God speaks to Abraham and makes this promise:

"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others." (Genesis 12:2, NLT)

Abraham's fame comes as God's gift. Fame is best when God is the one who elevates our names (like Abraham's) and makes us recognizable and influential.

But the "god of self" desires the attention of others, at any cost. Today's "influencer" culture finds people desperate to have others shower them with attention. They worry about "likes" on social media, they focus more effort posting a video of an event than watching the event, they crave more and more "followers" to boost their numbers.

And don't think it's an isolated temptation: about 60% of Gen Z aspires to be an online "influencer!"

Most can't handle it.

I've seen people go from relative obscurity to quick fame online, and it is sad to watch the "god of self" try to shift and morph a person's personality and platform to keep as much of the attention as possible. Some people crumble under the pressure; some lose the joy that made them attractive in the first place. But rather than stay true to a principle, they chase the latest trend so viewers like you might "like and follow" them.

Influencers want the acclaim of a god, but they lack the ability to inspire worship or the fortitude to handle fame.

The Impact of Idolatry



If you have ever been tempted to worship at the altar of self, you aren't alone. Each of us looks for creative ways to avoid God's commands, to prop up our own desires, or to value our own views above His. We pursue things that are not Him, and we make our own cravings into graven images (aka idols).

Once you start worshiping the "god of self," you begin to see changes in your identity...and they most assuredly are not good. The "god of self" is unable to satisfy you! Instead, you'll find yourself becoming:



- **Arrogant** – unable to admit weakness or failure.
- **Insecure** – terrified of others’ opinions.
- **Defensive** – unwilling to hear constructive criticisms.
- **Lonely** – unable to handle authority or equals.⁵

Rather than producing glory, the “god of self” generates disappointment and worry.



The Ongoing Temptation

Why do we fall into this trap of worshipping ourselves, then? It’s because we’re in good company. Pride has been the pattern since the beginning.

The Original Sin (Genesis 3)



In the story of creation in the book of Genesis, we find the story of Adam and Eve’s Fall. The original couple is given free reign to inhabit and enjoy the Garden of Eden with only one stipulation: they are not to eat from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” under penalty of death.

But soon, the “serpent” (aka Satan) challenges that command:

*“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and **you will be like God**, knowing both good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4–5, NLT)*

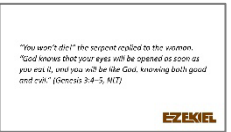
“You will be like God.” No more restraints, no more accountability. On equal footing. Satan’s claims are bold...and wrong.

Adam and Eve give in easily, and they discover that being “like God” is not so great when you *aren’t* God. Their “idolatry of self” places them in spiritual death, a condition that affects not only themselves but all of humankind!

Idolatry of self doesn’t stop in Genesis – it continues to be a theme woven throughout the pages of Scripture and history. People continue to think they are equal to or above God.

- The Tower-builders of Babel (Genesis 11) wanted to “make a name for themselves.”
- King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:30) marveled at his own “mighty power.”
- The people of the last days (2 Timothy 3:2) are described as being “lovers of self.”

There’s even a striking example in the book of Ezekiel.



“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4–5, NLT)

⁵ *Gods at War* by Kyle Idleman (p. 229-230)



Examples in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 28 & 29)

Recap of Ezekiel

Most of you know that we've been studying the Old Testament prophetic book of Ezekiel and hearing how the prophet Ezekiel received and declared the Word of God.

In the book, Ezekiel has seen striking visions (from God and of God), he has acted out strong messages, and he has proclaimed judgment on the nation of Judah and the people of Jerusalem.

As we reach the next section in our overview of the book (chapters 25-32), we see God's judgment extend to the surrounding nations. Judah is not the only one on God's radar screen. God also sees the sins of nations like Ammon, Moab, and Philistia. Their inclusion in God's justice showcases His power and sovereignty.

But as the judgments are levied, two individuals get special consideration: the king of the city of Tyre and the ruler of the nation of Egypt.

Ezekiel's messages to these two men (and their people) are lengthier than the messages of judgment. They are condemned for different reasons, but there is a common thread between them: the two rulers are practicing "idolatry of self!"

Message Against Tyre

Listen to God's message to Tyre:

Son of man, give the prince of Tyre this message from the Sovereign LORD:

"In your great pride you claim, 'I am a god! I sit on a divine throne in the heart of the sea.' But you are only a man and not a god, though you boast that you are a god. You regard yourself as wiser than Daniel and think no secret is hidden from you. With your wisdom and understanding you have amassed great wealth—gold and silver for your treasuries. Yes, your wisdom has made you very rich, and your riches have made you very proud.

"Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you think you are as wise as a god, I will now bring against you a foreign army, the terror of the nations. They will draw their swords against your marvelous wisdom and defile your splendor! They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die in the heart of the sea, pierced with many wounds. Will you then boast, 'I am a god!' to those who kill you? To them you will be no god but merely a man! You will die like an outcast at the hands of foreigners. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!"
(Ezekiel 28:2–10, NLT)

The prince of Tyre is caught up in the grand delusion that he is special! He thinks that his riches and wisdom have made him superior to everyone. But God promises to put him in his place. The city of Tyre and all its economic prosperity will be held accountable.

Message Against Egypt

Likewise, the king of Egypt (Pharaoh) is rebuked for his arrogance.

“Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: “I am your enemy, O Pharaoh, king of Egypt— you great monster, lurking in the streams of the Nile. For you have said, ‘The Nile River is mine; I made it for myself.’”
(Ezekiel 29:3, NLT)

Pharaoh thinks that he is special. His position atop a perennial superpower that has existed for *dynasties* will now be toppled.

Ezekiel will go on to proclaim the downfall of Pharaoh as well as his nation of Egypt as a warning to anyone foolish enough to trust them for protection (*AHEM...Judah, this means you*). But it also serves as a warning to anyone who is so arrogant...so confident...so delusional as to think that they are on the same playing field as God.

- You and I cannot create.
- You and I cannot control.
- You and I cannot convince.

We may want to think that we are gods or act like we answer to no god but ourselves, but the reality is that we can't even control our own lives! We don't get to decide if our lungs continue to draw air, or if the sun rises over the horizon, or if war is averted, or if a child makes good choices when we are away.

We are foolish if we think that our plans can rival or compare with God's!

That realization provides us with the right answer to today's question.



The Humble Solution

“Am I God?” The answer is “NO.”

The Scriptures prove it. Yet we still fight that temptation daily; we still want to go our own way; we want to follow our feelings; we want to ignore orders with impunity.

That's what we, in our pride, want to do.

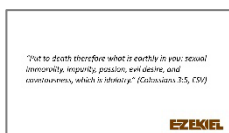
But let me encourage you: Don't.

Don't go your own way. Don't follow your own feelings. Don't ignore God's commands.

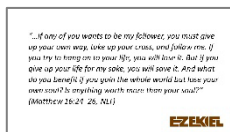
If you know that you aren't a god, then the only wise option you have is to change your allegiance and to worship the True God!

You must eliminate the competition!

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (Colossians 3:5, ESV)



Put another way, Jesus tells us:



“...If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?” (Matthew 16:24–26, NLT)

To fight our pride and depose the “god of self,” we must have humility. Humility is the opposite of pride. To paraphrase Augustine (one of the great minds of Christian history), “humility is the first, second, and third part of godliness.”

How do we achieve it?

How do we achieve humility?

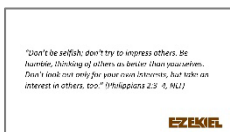
Well, you could take the route that St. Francis of Assisi took.



Once Francis of Assisi became a celebrated figure and the object of constant adulation, he is said to have assigned to a fellow monk the task of reminding him of his failures and of how little he deserved the praise he was receiving.⁶

Good news: If you are married, that person is already in your life and fulfilling that task. LOL

Humility isn't a matter of thinking poorly of yourself, though. It is just thinking *less* of yourself. The “god of self” can think of nothing but self; a humble servant of God can think of nothing but Jesus and the ones that He loves.



“Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” (Philippians 2:3–4, NLT)

That passage gives us at least four practical ideas to help you gain humility and fight against pride.

Actions

- **Turn down opportunities to be in the spotlight.** Consider ways to give others a chance to shine, to put the focus on them instead of yourself. Maybe it involves delegating a task or doing something anonymously. The “god of self” can stand when others get attention, so give it to them!



⁶ [Pride & Humility by Robert Rayburn \(ligonier.org\)](http://Pride & Humility by Robert Rayburn (ligonier.org))

- **Ask “How did I get here?”** If you think, “I’m successful!” or “I’m handsome,” tack on an extra question. “How did I become this way?” Consider the outside influences, the factors beyond your control, the people who poured into you to enable your victories. Asking how they were responsible for your success will broaden your field of vision and help you see beyond yourself.
- **Serve others.** Look for needs in the life of others and determine to step in...even if nobody knows it was you doing it. Serving others will help you understand that the world doesn’t revolve around you, and it will bring joy to the God we should actually be serving.
- **Redirect praise.** In your mind, if not on your lips, redirect the praise you receive and give it to God! Thank Him for providing for your needs, placing you in the situation, and giving you the skills/strength to do something good.

Humility will help you to counter the temptation to worship the “god of self!”

Closing



The temptation to follow our own ways is ancient - from church history to the New Testament, to people like the kings of Tyre and Egypt in Ezekiel, to the Garden of Eden.

It would be foolish to think that you and I would escape it.

But just because we are tempted to think we’re as important as a god doesn’t mean that we must worship ourselves. We can fight against it. We can choose humility over pride. We can look for ways to be more obedient to God, and more aware of others.

“Am I God?” No. I never have been, and I never will be.

So, if you ever see me taking more credit than I should, or considering myself as being more important than I should, say something. And if I see you putting yourself on the throne instead of giving God credit, I’ll say something.

We need to hold each other accountable for avoiding pride, and instead, humbly worship the One and Only God alone!



Prayer

Invitation

During the song of invitation today, please use it as an opportunity to evaluate your own heart. Have you been worshiping yourself – putting your desires and feelings above God's call on your life? Are you allowing arrogance or boasting to get in the way of humility?

If so, ask for forgiveness and repent – turn away from it. Allow God's Holy Spirit to convict you and then to draw you to worship the God who deserves all praise.

Bless the Lord – and not yourself – as we sing our song of invitation.

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

"Am I God?"

Idolatry of Self

Idolatry Defined (Exodus 20:2-3)

The God of Me (1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6; Proverbs 3:34)

Example: "Pride" (1 John 2:3)

Example: "Fame" (Genesis 12:2)

The Impact of Idolatry

The Ongoing Temptation

The Original Sin (Genesis 3:4-5)

Examples in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 28 & 29)

Recap of Ezekiel

Message Against Tyre (Ezekiel 28:2-10)

Message Against Egypt (Ezekiel 29:3)

The Humble Solution

How do we achieve it? (Colossians 3:5; Matthew 16:24-26; Philippians 2:3-4)

Sermon Discussion ?s

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- What are you better at than other people? Demonstrate or show off your skill.
- Does your success with this skill ever lead to pride? Why or why not?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Define idolatry. See Exodus 20:2-3 as a starting point.
- What are some things (people, items, experiences, gods) that can be “idols” for us today? Which ones are most tempting for you?
- Look at the list you just made. How does each one put YOUR desires above what GOD desires for your life?
- What are some synonyms for “pride?” Can you find a verse that speaks about each?
- When you view yourself as a ‘god,’ how could it lead to arrogance? Loneliness? Insecurity?
- What was the temptation for Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:4-5? Why hasn't the temptation gone away for humankind?
- Read Ezekiel 28:2-10 as an example of “idolatry of self.” Do you share any characteristics with the prince of Tyre?
- What steps does God take to humble him? Has God ever humbled you before? How?
- What are some ways that you can build humility in your life?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Thank God for being the One and Only God! Ask for forgiveness for times when you elevate your desires above His.
- Pray for help redirecting praise to God instead of yourself.