

How You Turned to God ***I Thessalonians 1: 6-10***

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Paul praised the little church in Thessalonica for their faith and faithfulness. He noted how they became imitators of those who brought them the gospel. They became imitators of the God they met in Jesus. As I worked this passage with the elders and staff this week, I asked this question, “What do you hope and pray you show to others about life in Christ? In other words, what do you hope will be worth imitating?”

You have such faith-filled leaders! Their answers were beautiful:

- I hope someone will see that I loved the Word of God.
- I hope they will see joy and hope as a quality of my life.
- I hope they will see dependence on the Lord, not myself, and how that leads to service to God and others.
- When trials come, as they will, I hope others will see that I remain steadfast and confident because of Christ at the center of my life.
- I want my leadership to display someone who is calm under fire, loving under pressure, and always focused on the deeper mission.
- I’d like them to see a lifetime of having courage to stand up for what matters, for truth, beauty, goodness, liberty, equality and justice.
- I want them to be able to imitate a faith that is genuine.
- To see that administrative tasks have ministry at the heart of them.
- I hope they see perseverance and kindness, hospitality, a sense of present peace and security based on what Christ has done and will do.

What a great list! Aren’t those the very qualities that would make you feel your life had truly been a success? Well how do we get there? In vs. 9 and 10 Paul expressed the formula for transformed living. He gave us in just a sentence the very dynamic of faith. Faith that gets us joined to Jesus once. Faith that is a continuing process of dying and rising with Christ. Look at the 3 things they do:

You *turned* to God
from idols
To *serve* the living and true God, and
To *wait* for his Son from heaven

Let's note how this has a past, present and future dimension:

Past: You turned from idols
Present: You serve: worship and work for Jesus
Future: You wait now for his return then.

And let's note how this matches the ancient affirmation we say every time we have communion:

Past: Christ has died: You died to idols.
Present: Christ is risen: You live to serve him now
Future: Christ will come again: You wait for his return.

We're onto something very deep, but so simply said, something at the very heart of worship. To turn, to serve, to live in hope of what will be. So how do we get in on this more and more?



Recently someone was talking about Bluetooth pairing, and I realized how apt Bluetooth is to illustrate what Paul is talking about. Bluetooth signals are all over the place. They're emitted from our computers and phones if they are turned on. But that is not enough to get any sound through your speakers. The devices have to be paired. They have to sync up with each other.

News of the gospel goes forth everywhere. It's heard on podcasts and from pulpits. There are billboards and books. Bible studies and personal

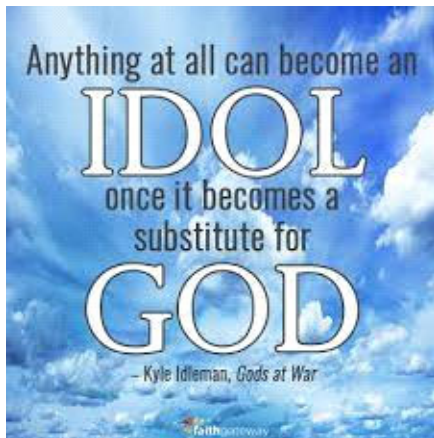
conversations. You can watch the Jesus film in 100 languages on your phone anywhere in the world. The news about Christ is all over. But that does me no good unless I am spiritually paired with Christ. We have to sync up. By faith and the Holy Spirit. I open my heart, the Spirit connects me in a life giving way to Jesus. We pair.

So far so good, but here's the issue. We have a great Bose speaker at home. It's only four inches square but puts out more and better sound than all my huge old speakers used to. I play music through my phone on the Bose when we are paired up. But, if I have paired my phone with the Bose speaker, I can't just play music from my computer through the Bose. First I have to *disconnect* from the phone. Then I have to pair up with the computer. During the process, the voice on the Bose says Pairing! Then, Connected!

If we want to be dynamically paired with Jesus, we have to disconnect from idols. We can't be paired to both. That's the harsh reality of it. I'd like to be paired to both. I want to have a full life in Christ and a full life of hedonism. In fact I'd like Jesus to help me enjoy all the trappings of the good life so I don't really need to depend on God for anything, because I can get all I want with a nice dose of safe spirituality. It's just that it doesn't work that way.

Before he started publishing best-selling books, Tim Keller at Redeemer Church in New York City was doing ground breaking work on helping us understand how idols function in the modern world. I'd never heard of Keller when a seminary professor passed out some of his worksheets on idolatry. They were instantly eye-opening. So let's lean now on Tim's great insights.

Not too many people have little statues by their bedside that they literally worship. But is it possible that we nonetheless have idols controlling our life and dominating our imagination? Absolutely.



Keller explains that an idol is ***anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...*** A counterfeit god is ***anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.*** An idol is simply a god-substitute.

But here's the key. Idols are most often good things raised to a too-high level. Most of our idols are delightful, pleasing, comforting, interesting things that become destructive when raised above our devotion to God.

So, how can you identify if something is functioning in your life as an idol? How can you tell if you are worshipping a counterfeit God?

One way to tell is by identifying strong emotions in us that get triggered if something we love is threatened. Keller asks these diagnostic questions:

- If you are *angry*. Ask, "Is there something here *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry, because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?"
- If you are *fearful or badly worried*. Ask, "Is there something here *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared, because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?"
- If you are *despondent or hating yourself*: Ask, "Is there something

here *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so 'down,' because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?"

He goes on to name some common functioning idols in our modern lives. Here are just ten with a bit of explanation.

Power idolatry: Life only has meaning if I have power and influence over others. I've often thought of having a T-shirt printed that says, "Do What I Say: You'll Be Happier!"

Approval idolatry: I only have worth if I am loved and respected by people. I feel undone if people are not pleased with me.

Comfort idolatry: Life is only worth living if I have this kind of security and this amount of luxury. That's what infuriates me about being delayed in an airport with thousands of other stranded, needy, and annoying people.

Control idolatry: I only have worth if I am able to get mastery over my life. Because if I am not holding it all together, surely everything will fall apart.

Helping idolatry: I only have worth if people are dependent on me and need me. I don't know how to stop trying to be useful, or even essential, to others.

Independence idolatry: I must be completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone. As my nanny used to tell me, when I was about 3, I stood up in my crib asking to be taken out. I told her, "You know I'm not the kind of man to be caged!"

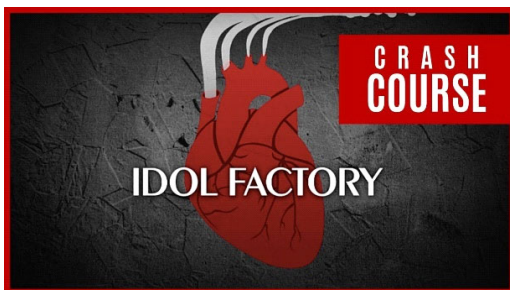
Work idolatry: My worth depends on my being highly productive and getting a lot done. What will I do if I'm not doing this? If I discover the world goes on without my contribution, then what good am I?

Ideology idolatry: I can only be happy if my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power. I'm just depressed if *those* people seem to be winning. All is lost if *they* get their way.

Inner ring idolatry: I simply must be included in this particular social grouping or professional grouping. Why don't those prominent theologians recognize what I have contributed and invite me into their circle? Wouldn't I make a great speaker at that conference?

Family idolatry: My fulfillment depends on my children being happy and making me proud. Or my parents being proud and happy with me. No pressure kids, but my happiness depends on your success!

We can name so many others, whether it's the idol that the one with the most toys wins. Or it's the idol that only if I can express my sexual desires will I be fulfilled, Or its cleaned up but equally idolatrous counterpart, the myth that one true partner can and must meet all my needs. It's the idol of the Gusto Grab, seeking vivid experiences as the point of life. This idol is summarized in the mistaken idea that checking off the Bucket List is the point of life.



No wonder John Calvin said the human heart is a factory of idol production! We are always trying to get the fulfillment only God can give from an alternative source. Idols are front-end loaded. They promise immediate fulfillment. Have this now. The cost only comes later. The triune God of grace, on the other hand, seems to be a terrible marketer. "If anyone would be my disciple," Jesus said, "he must take up his cross and follow me on the way to Golgotha." That's your lead, Jesus? Surely there's got to be some shinier, less demanding, more immediately appealing source of life!

Of course, the deal with idols is that they always disappoint. And then, even as they are disappointing us, they demand payment. Ask the pornography addict. Or the pain pills slave. Or the woman who idolized the power of her youthful beauty and now sees it fade. Or the man who traded

his family for the once in a lifetime business opportunity, again and again. One seminary professor named that idol “the bitch goddess of success.” She’s a harsh one. Or ask the couples who looked to each other for all meaning and purpose. Then, the honeymoon ended and all they see in each other’s eyes is disappointment. Idols always, always disappoint.

Jesus calls us to turn from them. To trust him first, before he delivers what we most want. He calls us to baptism, to go under the waters to die to the idols, the old life, the ego and the sin. We die first when we surrender control to him. We believe before we see. We leap into the promise that we will come up from the waters, dripping wet with grace. Jesus will be there with us, dripping wet with the love that has cleansed our sin and given us the taste of new life.

Christ wants to be paired with us. But he won’t let us sync up with him until we disconnect with our idols. We can’t have it both ways. And no easy road is promised to us. The Thessalonians faced immediate persecution. Instant rejection. Persistent shaming. But, in community with one another they found it to be more than worth it. Worshipping Jesus who was raised from the dead, they knew what no idol can give: the sense of everlasting life. They realized true cleansing of sin. The deep assurance of God’s acceptance. The hope of Jesus’ return to set all things right. All life came into focus and the vision filled them with wonder.

The report about the Thessalonians had already reached throughout the region. Paul praised them for “how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” That’s once for all for salvation. It’s pictured and sealed in baptism. We die to idols and rise to Christ. It’s also the continuing dynamic of the Christian life. It’s pictured and sealed in Communion. We disconnect daily, weekly, from sin and idols. We pair with Jesus as we take in his body and blood. Come Jesus, all the way inside me. Cleanse me of my sins. Shut down the idol factory. Make me wholehearted and willing to live for you alone. When we do that, week after week, God creates a life worth imitating.