**Capitol Hill Baptist Church**

**Stewarding Health, Wealth, and Happiness**

**Week 13**

**Idolatry: The Enemy of Stewardship**

**PRAYER**

**I. Introduction**

We spent the last 13 weeks considering what it looks like to be a good Steward of all the different gifts and resources that God has given to us. But I wonder if along the way there’ve been times when you've felt, I don’t *want* to be a better steward. Or I don’t think I *can* be a better Steward. I’ve tried, it just doesn’t work. That’s why this morning we’re looking at what I’ve called the enemies of stewardship. Namely, the idolatries that live deep down in our hearts. Very often as we look at the stock of stewardship, what we need is not to modify what our behavior is but to modify who our God is. Deep in our hearts we serve gods other than the true God and that is the root of our difficulties with stewardship. Let’s start with Abraham as an example.

In Genesis 12 God makes a promise that will resound through every chapter of the Bible. He appears to Abraham—still called Abram—and promises to make him a great nation. “And I will bless you and make your name great…in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2-3). Later, he takes Abram outside in the dark of night: “Look toward heaven, and number the starts, if you are able to number them…So shall your offspring be.” Abram “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (15:5-6).

Years pass, and at the age of one hundred, Abraham miraculously becomes a father. He and Sarah are overjoyed and name their baby son Isaac. Isaac…object of parental affection, divine promise, miraculous intervention. He must have seemed the most precious gift in the history of the world.

Then what happens? Chapter 22, “After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains” (22:1-2). Abraham obeys. And just as Abraham is about to kill his only son, an angel from heaven appears and stops him. God provides a substitute—a ram in the thicket. And retells his promise, “Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the starts of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.”

God didn’t test Abraham in the sense that you test an unknown substance, not knowing what you’ve got. God is all-seeing, all-knowing…”man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” No: God tested Abraham as he tested Job, as you test gold in the fire, to prove what really is. I love how Tim Keller describes this testing: “God’s extremely rough treatment of Abraham was actually merciful. Isaac was a wonderful gift to Abraham, but he was not safe to have and hold until Abraham was willing to put God first. As long as Abraham never had to choose between his son and obedience to God, he could not see that his love was becoming idolatrous[[1]](#footnote-1).”

This morning’s class is called “The Enemy of Stewardship”—the enemy God protected Abraham from—idolatry. Just like the gift of Isaac, everything gift you have is from God. Yet none of those gifts are “safe to have and hold” as Keller puts it, until our hearts is willing to put God first. When we love the gifts more than the giver, we destroy both ourselves and God’s gifts, and we defame the God of glory.

So it’s to this topic of idolatry that we turn to close out our three month study of Stewardship. We’ll begin by looking at how the gifts we’ve examined in this class can become idols—money, health, time, rest, and our abilities. We’ll see how the lens of Stewardship reveals why God hates idolatry so much—why it is the *first* of the ten commandments: “you shall have no other gods before me.” We’ll consider how we can identify where gifts are becoming idols, and finally we’ll close with some words about uprooting idols. So first…

**II. How Gifts Become Idols**

Some people in our church grew up worshipping physical idols. But that’s not all the Bible has in mind when it describes idolatry. As Ezekiel says of the elders of Old Testament Israel: “these men have taken their idols into their hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3). The heart, the Bible’s image for what, deep down, you most love and desire, is the true battleground of idolatry. 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[[2]](#footnote-2).”

That means that every gift of God is a candidate for idolatry. Money can be an idol, so can health, and rest, time, your abilities. Speaking of which, I’d love to have some humble examples from all of you. **Can any of you give examples of how God’s gifts have become idols to you?** [my own example: my schedule]

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller discusses three basic ways that the Bible talks about idolatry, which you’ll see in a chart in your handout. In Scripture, we love idols, we trust idols, and we obey idols. All three are useful in seeing how gifts become idols in our hearts.

So, following the chart:

* Sometimes the Bible uses a marital metaphor, where we love something more than God and so idolatry becomes spiritual adultery. We love idols because they promise us significance, value, worth, beauty. And we see those idols when we ask ourselves, “what do I most want in life?” Idolatry of our abilities can often fall into this category—where our abilities define our worth and significance, and so we prostitute ourselves to them. A false lover.
* Second Biblical analogy is what Keller calls a “religious metaphor”—that is, the language of salvation. Isaiah 45:20, “They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save.” These idols promise you control and security. They’re exposed when you ask, “what alleviates my fear”—and get an answer other than God. A false savior.
* Third: the “political metaphor.” A battle for allegiance. Many idols fit more than one metaphor, and especially with this third analogy because it’s often a symptom of the first two. Once we believe that an idol is the way to get what’s promised by a false lover or a false savior, that idol comes to control us—a false master. Romans 1:25 warns of those who “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and *served* the creature rather than the Creator.” Serving idols. Imagine someone who takes stewardship of time to an extreme, insistent that they always use their time in the most productive way no matter the cost to those around them. They become controlled by their schedule rather than the other way around. This idol often surfaces in seemingly uncontrollable anger or anxiety or despondency or guilt.

Sometimes we love our idols, sometimes we trust them, sometimes we obey them, sometimes all three. Those idols are the enemies of stewardship, and they are the enemies of God.

**Any questions?**

**III. Idols Are Worse Than We Think**

In point III, I want to pick up on something I just said, that idols are the enemies of stewardship and that they are the enemies of God. When we think of bad stewardship, we often think of living sub-optimally—which hardly seems like that big a deal. When we think of idols, we often think of “loving something more than God”—which we know to be bad, but which we also know to be commonplace. That’s where putting these two concepts—stewardship and idolatry together—is really quite powerful.

Stewardship proclaims the truth about God; idolatry lies about him. We can see that in the parable we’ve used to frame this whole class, the parable of the talents. The master entrusts his goods to three servants, promising that he’ll return, and reward them when he does. Two servants are faithful. That is, they have faith in the master’s promise and in faith they bet everything on his promise. They use the time he’s away to put his wealth to work for him. The third servant on the other hand tries to play it safe. He buries the talent, then presumably uses his time to serve himself. So when the master returns, he calls that third servant *wicked*. Even though that servant gave the talent back. Why? Because his actions—his lack of faith—lied about the master. Those actions proclaimed that the master was *not* trustworthy, that he was *not* generous. But that was a lie. The actions of these servants mattered not because of the money that was at stake but because of the reputation that was at stake. Namely, *God’s* reputation.

What I want you to see today is that the mindset of the third servant can be summed up in the concept of idolatry. He treated something—his own time and wealth—as more worthy of stewardship than the Master. And idolatry spewed out lies about the Master

Sometimes, we look at stewardship through the lens of results. For example, how much money are you giving to your church? But the parable of the talents tells us to look through the lens of faith. Does your giving reveal your faith in God’s promises? And, as a result, does it show off the reputation of God?

I’ll give you an example. Let’s say that Suzy is totally enslaved to a love of money. Because she considers herself a Christian, she gives 10% to her church in order to feel like she’s checked that box—but it takes zero faith to do that. Through the lens of results, you’d say something like “Suzy: that’s great, but you can do better. God’s really blessed you; you can totally give 20% if you want.” In other words, stewardship that’s sub-optimal. But through the lens of faith, you’d say something entirely different. “Suzy: because it doesn’t come from faith, your giving actually lies about the goodness of God. You throw down a measly 10% to satisfy the demands of this capricious deity and then go off to live life for yourself. Who’s the real god in your life?” Think of what Jesus said to the Pharisees: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13). Or Paul to the Romans: “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Bad stewardship is idolatry.

I think that this offers both a warning and an encouragement.

The warning is pretty simple: stewardship can be a safe-haven for legalism, where we use our money, our time, our bodies, our skills just enough for God to feel like we’re being righteous when in fact we’re deluding ourselves. We’re not honoring him any more than Solomon’s sacrifices honored the Lord when he was also sacrificing to the false god Molech on the side. God cares about your stewardship *in as much as it* shows your faith.

Which leads us to the encouragement. As Jesus said, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, it’s enough. What matters isn’t the size of your faith but the size of your God. You can get all caught up in whether your stewardship is “good enough,” whether you can “do better.” Those are fine questions to ask, but they’re not ultimate. Remember, the question in the parable of the talents is binary. Not, “how strong is your faith” but “do you have faith?” Does your use of your money, your time, your body, your abilities evidence faith that God is better than his gifts? “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Well done.

So then, the enemy of stewardship is idolatry. Idolatry is evil because it proclaims that something is better than God. Which makes poor stewardship not sub-optimal but heinous. Evil. And that leads to our next question, “if the idolatry of poor stewardship is so bad, how can I identify it in my life?”

**IV. How Can I Find Idolatry in My Heart?**

The problem with idolatry is that it’s often invisible. Even the Israelites in Exodus 32 may not have realized that worshipping a golden calf was idolatry; they were just worshipping the Lord in a way that was new and innovative!

You can get all twisted up in knots examining your emotions and motives to figure out whether you’re doing something because you’ve made it a false God or because you’re a faithful steward. And, of course, we all have mixed motives. So how do you know where you’ve made God’s gifts into false gods? Well, figuring that out is a life-long project. The basic tools of the trade are the normal means of grace:

* Scripture
* The Holy Spirit
* The Local Church
* Circumstances God uses to reveal your idolatry
* Behavior (as in, we recognize idolatry in the fruit of our lives. Galatians 5:19).

In addition, you’ll see on your handouts some questions to ask yourself in this area.

1. Can I imagine being content if things turn out differently than what I hope? Example: your child begins to go blind. You find yourself raging at God even as you desperately seek every available treatment. Your anger at him suggests that you took an assumption about your child’s future and made it a right, which he has unjustly stolen from you.
2. Is my fear out of proportion to the situation at hand? Example: I’ve broken my arm as a collegiate baseball player. The idea that this might be the end of my career is unthinkable. So I find myself obsessing over every detail of my recovery, desperate to wrest back control of my life.
3. Am I faithful as a steward *today*? Example: I’ve devoted my life to getting out of debt. I spend every waking moment focused on that goal. There’s nothing wrong with battling debt, but looking back over the last 12 months I really see no spiritual fruit in my life; everything is consumed with the fight.
4. Do I feel I’m better than others because of my stewardship? Example: using my time well has turned into an obsession and I find a real anger and panic if my schedule gets messed up. When I think about it, I realize that I’m terrified of losing my reputation as a guy who’s got it all under control. I can’t imagine not living that way.
5. Do you feel God has cheated you out of what was yours? Like in my first example, I feel real anger at God for putting me in such a hopeless situation. I had great plans for my life; what right did he have to come in and take them all away?
6. What are your most unyielding emotions? Which emotions—like hatred, anger, guilt, and so forth—would you most like to escape from but you can’t? Very often, the reason they are so lodged in your heart is because some form of idolatry is lodged in your heart.
7. Perhaps most obviously given the subject of this class: where do you feel like you’re not being a very good steward? A failed struggle to be a better steward of your money or your body or your time or your skills may well be rooted in idolatry. You love,

There’s no easy recipe for identifying the idols in our lives; as I said, it’s a life-long battle. Thankfully, it’s a battle God’s gonna win, as we someday stand before him “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle…[but] holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27).

**Any questions?**

**V. Fighting Idolatry**

Well then, what do we do about idolatry? How can we fight to be better stewards? I want to give you both a reactive and a proactive approach to fighting idolatry.

First is how we react to idolatry we discover: repentance.

*Repentance*

If you have a Bible, turn to James 4. I’ll start reading in verse 1.

1What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?  **2**You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

Let’s use one of the scenarios I gave a few minutes ago, where getting out of debt’s become an idol.

1. Desire🡪Disappointment. According to verse 2, idolatry begins with a desire—and this desire is often for a good thing. Like not being in debt. But you see how desire changes as we move through the passage. Paul Tripp talks about how a desire becomes a demand, which is expressed as a need[[3]](#footnote-3). When that need’s not met, it sets me up for disappointment.
2. Disobedience. So far all this has been in my head. But now it breaks out into action. In the case of James 4, I act out by quarreling and fighting, even murdering. I can’t have what I want, so I’m going to do whatever it takes to get it—regardless of what God has told me. I take a side job working Sunday mornings to earn some more money.
3. Adultery. Then James throws us for a loop by taking what had been a horizontal problem and reframing it as a vertical problem. Even if the result of my disobedience has been murder, James still sees the root of my issue as one of idolatry. He calls me a spiritual adulterer (verse 4) because I want something more than God. And in doing that, I’ve made myself God’s enemy—for all the reasons we discussed earlier.

That’s the low point of this passage. Enmity with God. So thank God for verse 6! “But he gives us more grace.” When we are powerless to fix our idolatry, God still acts. He’s still our savior. And our response to God is not yet an action, but a posture. Humility. How do we get there? Verse 7:

1. Submit. Now, I find the order of James’ words here to be telling. If I was writing this, I think I’d jump right to verse 8 where James tells us to mourn over our sin. As in, confess your sin to move near to God, and in forgiveness he’ll move toward you. But in practice that’s just not how it works, and James sees that. When my desires are full of idolatry, it’s really hard to *see* my sin! Let alone confess it. So what’s the command James gives me in verse 7? [Submit.] In humility, I decide that I’m going to submit to him, no matter the cost. I make the decision to repent. Then, as I draw near to God in humility, he promises to draw near to me. No matter how idolatrous I have become. That’s amazing! He will always draw near to me.

As I draw near to God, the way I’ve made zero debt to be an idol gradually becomes more clear to me. I commit myself to following him in obedience as best I can, and as I continue to walk that path of obedience, I see more ways in which I can obey.

1. Confess. But James isn’t done, is he? Now is the time for confession. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”

You’ll never get rid of idolatry simply by thinking differently. You need to understand it as sin—and explore your heart so that you can confess the sin that’s there. That is so contrary to our natural inclinations! We want to move on, to think about things better, to forget and hope we’ll change. That’s not what James has in mind. “Be wretched and mourn and weep!”

Why? I think the French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it well. “Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.”

Jesus said in Luke 7:47 that we love God to the extent we understand the depth from which we’ve been forgiven. So if we never explore that depth, we will never know our true forgiveness and we will never really love him.

1. Exaltation. Then, as we see Luke 7:47 take effect in the humility of confession, we find the exaltation of Christ’s love for us. We are forgiven much, and so we love much. [Luke 7:47: jumbo jet for the soul]

Now, freed from my idolatry, I can move forward as God’s faithful steward. I can push hard to get out of debt. Not because I’m driven by fear and desperation. But because I am driven out of love. Love for God who has entrusted me as steward his money. James 4 is a phenomenal guide to use when you are caught in idolatry, when you want to repent and escape. That’s the reactive way we fight idolatry.

*Faith and Enjoyment*

But I mentioned a proactive approach as well. An all-of-life approach. There are two main ways we bring glory to God in this life. Faith is one, which we’ve talked about a lot in this class. The other we’ve talked about too: enjoyment. Faith and enjoyment. We can fight idolatry as we follow God in faith even when things don’t quite make sense, risking everything that he’ll be true to his promises. And when things *do* make sense, we show off his worth by enjoying his gifts with thanksgiving…enjoyment as worship.

Let’s take faith first. What happens when you’re deprived of those things you’ve been called to steward? (Your health takes a toll. Someone steals your money.) Do you trust that God has bigger plans for you? Or do you rage at him? A key tool that God uses for freeing our hearts from idolatry is to take away the gift we’re tempted to treat as god. [if time: $8000 phone bill story]. Every time you choose the path of faith amidst deprivation, trusting God’s good purposes despite what you’ve lost, you’re moving your heart one step closer to whole-hearted, delighted service to your master.

Of course, quite often in the Christian life deprivation isn’t initiated by God but by us. You give money to your church. You give time to a struggling brother or sister. You give of your strength, of your skills to serve others. Every time you’re a “cheerful giver” you’re exercising faith that God’s blessings (when you give up what this world values) are worth more than this *world’s* blessings. Faith, in deprivation and in generosity, is a key way we can continually shake ourselves free from the idolatry of our hearts.

But in God’s kindness, faith isn’t the only way we bring glory to him. This Christian life is *not* one of suffering as much as we can possibly bear. At least not normally. 1 Timothy 4:4, “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” It’s God, later on in chapter 6, verse 17, who “richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

You *can* enjoy things in an idolatrous way—where you focus only on the gift and not the giver. But one of the chief delights of the Christian life is learning to enjoy the gifts of God as worship. To enjoy that time of rest, that great meal, that time on your bike, that beautiful work of art with thanksgiving. Not as idolatry but as worship. Use the goodness of God’s gifts, through thanksgiving, to reveal the goodness of God himself.

As you train your heart to see enjoyment as worship, you will progressively shake your heart free from idolatry and learn to enjoy God—the reason you were created in the first place.

**VI. Conclusion**

Well, there you have it. Poor stewardship is idolatry: loving, trusting, serving something more than God. We fight idolatry through repentence, James 4. And we fight it every day as we walk in faith when times are hard and worshipful enjoyment when times are good.

And with that, we close 13 weeks on stewardship. 13 weeks of training our hearts to delight in the goodness of the Master so that our lives might become beautiful portraits of his excellence, his sufficiency, his goodness, his glory.

Let’s finish our time in prayer.

1. *Counterfeit Gods*, page 14, paperback edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, p. xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *War of Words* page 59 in the 2000 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)