



What's in Your Heart?
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Heart idolatry has been a key metaphor within Biblical counseling to conceive the problem of entrenched sin in our lives. David Powlison noted that, “Idolatry becomes a concept with which to comprehend the intricacies of both individual motivation and social conditioning. The idols of the heart lead us to defect from God in many ways.”¹ This metaphorical attachment of idolatry to the heart is not just a modern, Christian spin upon the secular motivational theorists, giving biblical language to what is essentially a secular understanding of why we do the things we do. It reaches back to the Ten Commandments, where the first commandment forbids God’s people from having any other gods before Him; and the second commandment forbids them from making and serving the image or likeness of anything within the created order.

Question 95 of the Heidelberg Catechism, placed within the context of discussing what God requires of us in the first commandment, asks “What is idolatry” and then responds: “It is to imagine or possess something in which to put one’s trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word.”² In idolatry, we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator; exchanging the truth of God for a lie (Ro. 1:25). So relying upon *anything* instead of God and His revelation in Scripture is idolatry. The human mind, heart, or soul will even shape Godly things for its own idolatrous use. John Calvin said, “the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.”³

¹ David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair,’ ” *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, vol. 13, no. 2, Winter 1995, 35. See also Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), chapter 4.

² Mark Noll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1991), 157.

³ Calvin, J., & Beveridge, H. (1997). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: *Institutio Christianae religionis.*; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (I, xi, 8). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Ezekiel 14:1–11 richly captures this propensity of the human heart to fashion idols in a judgment oracle that begins with some of the elders of Israel coming to enquire of the Lord. But, as the Lord reveals to Ezekiel, they have set up idols in their hearts and placed the stumbling block of this iniquity before their faces. So God says through Ezekiel to the elders, that if any of God’s people come to Him with idols in their hearts and stumbling blocks before their faces, He will not speak of the issues they bring to Him. He will only address the idols in their hearts which have caused the estrangement between them. God calls upon these elders to repent of their idolatry; and adds that if they don’t repent, He will “stretch out His hand against them.”

We see here a pattern by which God repeatedly addressed the idolatry of His people in the Old Testament (Isa. chapters 1 & 2; Jer. 11; and Eze. 20). They wander after idols, resulting in God’s judgment upon them. The judgment motivates them to inquire of the Lord. God directly identifies the judgment as a consequence of their original idolatry, and calls upon them to repent or face destruction. God’s intention through this intervention process is for His people to resume their relationship with Him and stop wandering into their various idolatries: “that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord GOD” (Eze. 14:11). But as the history of the Old Testament illustrates, God’s people never seem to remain in relationship with Him. Their hearts “tend to wander.”

Within the book of Ezekiel itself, we see repeatedly how God calls for Ezekiel to prophesy judgment against the elders, prophets, shepherds, and people of Israel for their sin and idolatry. In Ezekiel 20 the elders come again to inquire of the Lord and are refused again because of their idolatry. There seems to be no hope that God will withhold His judgment. Those within the siege of Jerusalem (4:17) will “rot away because of their punishment.” Against the house of Israel God will stretch out His hand (6:14) and “make the land desolate and waste.” The Lord is against the shepherds (34:10) and “will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep.” The consolation God promises in Ezekiel 14:23 gives little comfort. We will know that He has done nothing without cause. Nevertheless, the four judgments of sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague will be sent against Jerusalem to kill its men and animals.

But then in Ezekiel 36, there is a wonderful promise from God: He will cleanse them from all their iniquity; their idolatrous heart will be replaced with a new heart. They will again be His people and He will be their God. They will be cleansed from their iniquities. God will rebuild the

ruined places and replant what was desolate. The despairing cycle of repeatedly wandering off in search of idols will be remembered with shame. He will place His Spirit within them, causing them to obey the statutes of the Lord and carefully obey His rules. The land that was desolate will be like the Garden of Eden. The fruit of the tree and the land will be restored. The vicious cycle of sin and folly described so clearly in Ezekiel 14 will be a thing of the past. A new cycle of Godly fruit and abundance will be made possible by a new, obedient heart and Spirit. We will be His people and He will be our God.

These dual, opposing cycles of idolatry and Godly fruit⁴ found in the above exposition of Ezekiel 14 and 36 illustrate the Pauline contrast in Galatians 5:16–26 of life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. The works of the flesh and the works of the Spirit are opposed to one another so we won't do what we want to do. What motivates us to do what we do? It's either a heart full of idolatries or a new God-given heart and His Spirit placed within us. The choice is ever before us to either serve the Lord or forsake Him and serve other gods (Joshua 24:14–15). Even with the clear impact upon our circumstances of heredity, environment, and seemingly random events; the choice remains as to how we will respond: new heart or idolatrous heart; serving the Lord or serving other gods and the idols of our heart. The allure and the assault of our life experience beguiles us towards idolatry. "Idolatry is a problem both rooted deeply in the human heart and powerfully impinging on us from our social environment."⁵ We have idols in our heart and wicked stumbling blocks before our faces. The human mind is an idol factory; we seek to rule ourselves apart from God.

As Oswald Chambers astutely noted, "The disposition of sin is not immorality and wrong-doing, but the disposition of self-realization—I am my own god."⁶ What's in **your** heart?

⁴ These cycles are also described by David Powlison in the "Changing Hearts Changing Lives" seminar as the cycles of folly and wisdom. Also see the session-by-session guidebook for the "Changing Hearts Changing Lives" series, written by Walter Henegar.

⁵ David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" 38.

⁶ Oswald Chambers, *My utmost for his highest: Selections for the year* (October 5). (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, c1935).