

- 1) Preaching to a Pagan Culture Begins with Questioning Reasons: " *Why* do you do this?"
 - a) Begin with asking questions:
 - i) I call this “toddler apologetics” – you keep asking “why” until you get down to the real root of what we believe
 - (1) “Because it just is” is the usual answer
 - (2) “Because God has said so” is the biblical answer
 - b) Include yourself with them:
 - i) “We are men with the same kinds of needs as you!”
 - (1) All people have the same desires for satisfaction
 - (2) Food, Shelter, Comfort, Joy, Sexual desires, etc.
 - (a) Only God doesn’t need any of these – He is needless of anything outside of Himself
 - (b) “not served by human hands” is how Paul says it to the Athenians in chapter 17
 - ii) They question the reasonableness of their actions by questioning its correlation to Reality.
 - (1) Their reasons for worshipping the apostles were erroneous
 - (a) Your assumptions about us are flawed
 - (b) Your belief that we can offer you anything because you sacrifice an animal to us is untrue
 - (2) Trust is misplaced when the object of one’s trust (“we men just like you”) is incapable of delivering what it promises
 - (a) **Questioning this assumed trust is the cornerstone of apologetics**
 - (b) “What are we trusting in to deliver us ultimate joy, life, peace?”
 - iii) The worship of anything but “the living God” will have erroneous *reasons* underneath it which need to be questioned
 - (a) “Why do you do this?” is a great question for anything!
 - (2) The question of “reasoning” is really a question of faith, of trust: “What do I *believe or trust* that this action will gain you, or achieve?”
 - c) Reveal the Inadequacies of Their Trust: Every life is distorted by a major “life lie”
 - i) We functionally sometimes think, often simply feel, but always behave as if something can give us the life and joy that only God can give
 - ii) These “worthless idols” spin out false belief systems of promises and demands, definitions of success and failure, happiness, worth, significance
 - (1) No created thing can possibly deliver on this, but we live in denial of it
 - (2) Really, we live in the denial of death – as if death doesn’t come to all
- 2) What is an Idol?
 - a) An idol is *anything* that we *ultimately* depend upon for joy, happiness, fulfillment, and blessing
 - i) Can be a good thing and it usually is
 - (1) The New Testament word is *epithumiai* – lusts, inordinate desires
 - (a) “over + desire”
 - (b) Making good things ultimate things
 - (i) A little wine to relax is good
 - (ii) Too much wine to escape reality is inordinate
 - (c) Things that we must have
 - ii) NOT necessarily a physical object
 - (1) Ezek 14:3, “Idols in their hearts”
 - (2) Reputation, Approval, Beauty, Quiet
 - iii) Often set up *beside* Jesus, or in addition to Him, not in complete exchange of Him
 - (1) The Lystrans wanted to add Jesus to their pantheon, not simply reject him
 - (2) Many people want to add Jesus as a moral example to what they really trust in
 - b) Idols mimic the one true God
 - i) They establish a system of law
 - (1) Principles which one must obey that define whether or not a person is good, significant, and truly living
 - (a) EXAMPLE: “Thou shalt find romance.”

(2) There are laws that, if one fails, makes you a failure, a sinner, replete with coming judgment and makes you bad, unacceptable, and unrighteous

(a) EXAMPLE: “If you do not find romance, you shall be worthless.”

ii) They establish a system of sacrifice/performance

(1) Rituals that must be made

(a) EXAMPLE: “Thou shalt make thyself nice, muscular, and wealthy, and avoid belching in public.”

(2) Sacrifices that must be given to appease said idol

(3) If sacrifices are made, you are acceptable

(4) If sacrifices are not made, you are unacceptable

(a) EXAMPLE: “If you do not make yourself beautiful and say any selfish thing, you will never obtain romance.”

iii) Idols make promises of redemption and joy

(1) If you obey its law and perform its sacrifices, then it promises you joy, fulfillment, happiness, MEANING

(a) EXAMPLE: “When thine romance is obtained, thou shalt truly live the fullest of life.”

(2) As long as you perform, you feel worth something

(a) “I have a wonderful romance, so life is good.”

(3) But, idols will never forgive you if you fail

(a) “My romance failed, so I am worthless and devastated.”

3) An Idol is All About and Only About Getting Power and Control

a) In reality, idols are “worthless” - powerless, empty, nothings

i) Is 41:6-7

ii) Is 40:20

iii) Is 41:22-24

(1) They cannot deliver what they promise to deliver, i.e. everything will let you down (even your own heart)

b) Paradoxically, idols are all about gaining power

i) The cultural and priestly elite use idolatry as a source of power (marketing 101)

(1) How? Because whatever you believe that you MUST have will be the thing which controls you – you will move heaven and earth to obtain it and hold onto it

(2) Why is Google worth \$650 billion, racing towards \$1 trillion? Because people HAVE to have its services.

c) Idols are tempting to set up because we want to control our own lives

i) Rom 1:18-29, “they did not honor God or give thanks to Him...see fit to acknowledge God...they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of the created.”

ii) We exchanged the immortal God for “reflections of created things” that we can control by our good performance, because we want to play a part in making ourselves significant (to make much of ourselves)

iii) Idols are whatever we depend upon *functionally* to make us significant

(1) EXAMPLE: Fishing righteousness

(a) “If I catch enough fish, a big enough fish, or do better than the guy with me, then I have fisherman’s righteousness and I am OK.”

(b) “If I don’t catch enough fish, a big enough fish, or get skunked while my buddy catches a new record, then I do not have fisherman’s righteousness and I do not feel significant.”

(i) So I get angry, because my buddy has gotten between me and my fishing idol

(ii) Or, I get anxious and depressed because I failed my idol and it will not forgive me

(c) So I lie to protect my power of fishing righteousness

(i) Every external action of sin comes from the internal root sin of idolatry in our hearts: a presumption that obtaining this idol’s approval will gain me Life (in some form)

1. We think that we *must have* something to make us acceptable and righteous besides Jesus

iv) Our idols are all about reputation, glory, and so we sin to protect that reputation and are, in fact, seeking our own glory and to build our own reputation of righteousness

- 4) The Only One Capable of Delivering on His Promise of Ultimate Life is God
- a) "That you should turn from these empty things"
 - i) They are empty because they are impotent
 - ii) "from these empty things" implies a type of service to them, a turning to them in order to obtain some blessing
 - (1) But in doing so, they enslave us to their false promises
 - (a) This enslavement to our idols is evidenced by two primary emotions:
 - (i) Fear/Anxiety:
 1. "If I don't do well enough to obtain the promised blessing, then I feel fearful and depressed, overwhelmed by anxiety and feelings of worthlessness."
 - (ii) Anger:
 1. "If somebody gets in my way, or blocks me, from obtaining the promised blessing, I get angry, embittered, and wrathful towards them."
 - (b) Whatever I feel that I HAVE to have in order to be fulfilled, controls me: my emotions, my thoughts, and my actions.
 - (i) Thus, all my actions flow out of my affections, which are based upon what I believe to be true and capable *in that particular moment* of delivering me joy, life, and peace.
 - iii) Idols are manipulated and bargained with by performance and sacrifices
 - (1) They never operate by grace: you either perform and *feel* accepted, or you fail to perform are rejected; idols cannot save you and they will never forgive you
 - (a) "If I obey, then I am accepted."
 - (2) This is why we swing back and forth in our life, because our tossing between success and failure of our idols (those things that define our acceptability and righteousness) makes us bounce from boastful anger to self-pitying depression
 - (a) Both success and failure with an idol is about getting power (sometimes you attain it, sometimes you don't, but the system is the same: works-righteousness, power, and control)
 - (3) We really do these surface sins because our reputation has been threatened or we have failed our idol, and we must protect our righteousness.
 - (i) James 4:1-10 – "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Is it not this – that your lusts are at war within you...you crave but do not obtain, so you fight..."
 - b) The statement of import: "We bring you good news"
 - i) "to the living God"
 - ii) There is an announcement that will free you from such "empty idols" which are incapable of saving
 - (1) The news is good because there is someone who is capable of delivering you because He is truly LIFE
 - c) The good news is that there is "The God who made everything"
 - i) That is a statement of the life-exuding and life-giving power, capability, and faithfulness
 - ii) The God who made EVERYTHING is capable of rescuing us from our sins, our sufferings, and our sorrows
 - iii) The God who made EVERYTHING is superior to any other so-called god because He is unmade and they are not
 - iv) The Capability of God to grant life is a foundational truth which must be believed before He will be turned to and trusted
 - (1) This is why Paul doesn't go to God's mercy first; he goes to God's power first, as objectively evidenced by Creation
 - (a) He is comparing the relative weakness of men "men with passions like yours" to the obvious creative power of God evidenced by the existence of...everything
 - (b) This is also why idolaters begin with questioning God's exclusive and uniquely originating creative power as the primary means of "reasoning" that they don't need to turn to Him alone
 - d) To the living God who is GOOD
 - i) The statement of historical problem: "In the past he allowed all the peoples to go their own ways"
 - ii) The calling forth of witnesses to God's goodness, even in the presence of great error, trouble, and suffering: "He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with nourishment (*trophé*) and good cheer (*euphrosyne*, one of the "Graces" in Greek mythology)"

- (1) This God who has all power has been kind, merciful, provident, and gracious to us all
- (2) He provides what we truly need – it is evident!!
- e) Unlike false promisers, God can only be responded to by repentance – a loss of power, not a performance of power
 - i) Jesus' performance and sacrifice makes us righteous
 - (1) This is why it is so significant that Jesus is God – because God is the one doing the performance, making salvation completely a gift from beginning to end
 - ii) We lose our power and simply receive by faith the performance and sacrifice of Jesus
 - (1) "I am accepted in Jesus, so I obey"
 - (2) His glory and His righteousness in my salvation
 - (3) His reputation is my desire

5) What Do We Do About Idols?

- a) Question Our Reasons
 - i) Look at repeated, excessive, uncontrollable emotions and thoughts
 - (1) If you are angry
 - (a) "Is there something too important to me? Something that I am telling myself that I have to have? Do I feel like something is being blocked from me that I think is a necessity when it is not?"
 - (2) If you are fearful or badly worried
 - (a) "Is there something that is too important to me? Something that I am telling myself that I have to have? Am I scared because something is being threatened that I think is a necessity when it is not?"
 - (3) If you are despondent or hating yourself:
 - (a) "Is there something too important to me? Something that I am telling myself that I have to have to be acceptable? Am I despondent because I have lost or failed at something that I think is a necessity when it is not?"
 - ii) Recognize Them
 - (1) What are the most important things in your life?
 - (2) These may be good things
 - (3) But when they become *ultimate* things, we have misplaced them
 - (a) EXAMPLE: Can I give up my daughter to be a missionary to a foreign land, knowing that I may never see her again this side of heaven?
 - (b) If I answer no, or even the struggle to answer "yes", reveals that my heart is prone to idolize my family.
 - (c) But when Jesus is my ultimate, and His gospel is my ultimate boast, then my daughter's participation in that praise is a joy to my heart and my hope is fixed upon the ultimate joy of worshipping and praising Jesus, and I will love her better, too
- b) Apply the Gospel to our Reasons
 - i) Idols operate by performance and fear, anger, anxiety, and pride come from our performance, either because we have lived up to our idol/righteousness, or we have failed our idol/righteousness
 - ii) The gospel is the good news of grace!!!
 - (1) Jesus has performed it all and given us His righteous and perfect record (passive righteousness)
 - (2) Jesus has given His life in exchange for ours (atonement), His death paid for our failures
 - (3) Even when we fail in our hearts and entrust ourselves to a worthless idol, that perfection of faith is not our righteousness which makes us acceptable to God!
 - (a) We can rest and repent joyfully *because He rescued us according to His divine kindness, not our perfection of faith or love or affection for Him*
 - iii) EXAMPLE:
 - (1) Imagine a Christian who says, "I have become very depressed since I lost my job. I feel like I am worthless to have around."
 - (a) Lecturing Counselor: "What you are doing is wrong. Repent!"
 - (i) This may be part of the problem, but it doesn't go deep enough, we need to know "why" we feel and behave this way.
 - 1. Why do I feel worthless?

2. What do I feel that I need to have besides Jesus?
 3. What is the underlying righteousness that I think I have failed?
- (ii) To simply tell an unhappy person to “repent and change your behavior” is insufficient because it only deals with the behavior, not the root beneath it, that says if you don’t live up its moral standard you are a worthless failure and unacceptable to God.
- (b) Nice Counselor: “Your problem is that you don’t see how good and valuable that you are. Rejoice!”
- (i) This may also be part of the problem but this approach also fails to go deep enough. It focuses on the feelings, but not on the “why” of the feelings
 1. What am I afraid of not having – do I really NEED it?
 2. What is so important that I am devastated to lose?
 3. What is the false promise behind it?
 - (ii) To simply tell a person “God loves you – rejoice!” is insufficient because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says even if God loves you, but you don’t have this, then you are still a nothing.
 - (iii) You must replace this belief through turning from the particular false promiser
- (c) Gospel Counselor: “Your problem is that you are looking to something other than Jesus for your happiness. Turn away from it and rejoice in Him!”
- (i) This confronts the person with the sin underneath the sins and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to something other than Jesus to bring us real life and joy.
 1. Paul tells us that sin’s bondage is broken when we come out from “under the law” – when we stop placing our expectation of joy upon our performance and place it squarely upon Jesus’ performance (we believe the Gospel *functionally and particularly*)
 2. Only when we realize and seize the truth in our hearts that we have the righteousness of Jesus by faith in Him is the power of sin broken in our lives
- iv) Romans 6:14 – “For sin will have no mastery over you, for you not under law, but under grace”
- (1) You will only live “under grace” and free to the degree that you have both turned from trusting false promisers and instead turned and rested and rejoiced in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who is the only one capable of *granting* true and lasting life.

This is how you present the gospel to a pagan culture, a culture unfamiliar with the story of God’s covenant dealings with Israel and the promise of a Messiah, of the categories of sin and righteousness and judgment. You compare *reasons* for doing what we do and question the capability and the goodness of the object of those reasons. What are our cultural idols? What are the things presented to you which promise real life, great joy, and lasting peace? There are many, many such false promisers, from diamonds to romantic love, to sexual expression, to health, and on and on and on.

We must learn to question the “why” we think that such presented promisers can actually deliver real life.

We can also learn to ask for the reasons why we value what we do in our society? Where do such values come from? Why do I value compassion? Darwinian naturalism gives me no reason to do so. Why do I hate greed or racism or disagreement? Why is it “wrong” for me to take your wallet? Why are you so angry at that, or so sad when she does that? What are you believing that you must have in order to truly live? What do you do when you fail? When others fail you? Why?

And we must learn to present the God who alone is capable of giving us real and lasting meaning, the only one capable of forgiving you completely when you fail, for he has paid your massive debt, and the only one good enough to keep His promise completely, for He paid your massive debt at His own eternal expense. There is no other promiser like Him. He made all that exists and suffered to redeem us from our captivity to death and the sin which destroys us all. This God can be trusted in the mean time, in the times between the promise and the fulfillment, so let us turn to Him with the full assurance of faith and draw near, for He cleanses our consciences and washes us pure in the waters of His eternally faithful promise.