



Gospel Change

Sample

This file is protected by copyright and is for the personal use of the purchaser of this course only. Distribution or resale of it is strictly prohibited.

Unit 2: Gospel Change and repentance

Introduction

The first discipline of change is repentance, or turning from idols. We will look at four areas:

- What are idols?
- The role of suffering and mistreatment
- Repenting of our idolatries
- Repentance in light of the gospel

What are idols?

Idols are not merely crude material objects set upon pagan altars. Those objects were symbols for what a particular god could provide for its worshippers. When we understand that symbolism, we understand the sophisticated business that idol-making has become for us modern people. Idol worship is not something found only among the naive and superstitious, but is characteristic of all human beings.

Our idols are those things we count on to give our lives meaning. They are the things of which we say, “I need this to make me happy,” or, “If I don’t have this my life is worthless and meaningless.” We say by implication, “Lord, it’s good to have you, but there’s this other thing which I must have or my life is not happy or meaningful. If I can’t have it I will despair. You are not enough. I need this too as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take this from me, I’d turn my back on you. For you are negotiable, but this is not! This is the real goal of my life. If you are not useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you.”

Idols are by no means limited to ‘one per person’. Calvin commented that the human heart was an idol-making factory. We are sinfully ingenious at generating new idols and can easily find ourselves serving a number of them at the same time. “An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero.”³ Believing that they have the power to grant us happiness and fulfilment, we come under their mastery. We hotly pursue them and wait for them to bestow their ‘blessings’ upon us. They come to control us. We feel that we must have them and go to great lengths to get them.

It is when we begin to speak of these things by saying “I must have it” that we recognise the deep similarity between idols and what the Bible elsewhere calls the “desires of the flesh” (for example, Romans 13:14; Galatians 5:16–24; Ephesians 2:3; 1 John 2:16). Again we must be careful that we do not define this concept too narrowly. ‘Lusts of the flesh’ are more than bodily appetites; rather we should think of them as ‘inordinate desires’. Many desires are legitimate in and of themselves, though some are not. Powlison makes the following list: “Desires of the body include life itself, air, health, water, food, clothing, shelter, sexual pleasure, rest and exercise. Desires of the mind include happiness, being

³ Keyes, R. ‘The idol factory’, in *No God but God: breaking with the idols of our age* (ed. Guinness, O. and Seel J.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1992)

loved, meaning, money and possessions, respect, status, accomplishment, self-esteem, success, control, power, self-righteousness, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, marriage and family.”⁴ The problem is not with wanting many of these things, but with wanting them too much. Our desires become inordinate. They come to rule us instead of God. We want them more than we want to obey and please God. When they assume this place they go from being things we want to lusts. They become idols.

So ‘idolatry’ and ‘lusts of the flesh’ are the summary terms for what is wrong with people in God’s eyes. These terms enable us to explain why we do what we do. They get at the motivation of human behaviour. Idol worship leads to actions, attitudes and thoughts which overtake us and dehumanise us. All of our harmful behaviours and uncomfortable feelings — anger, worry, self-pity, and so on — can be explained in terms of our lusts and idols (Luke 6:43).

Freeing ourselves from these problems will involve breaking the power of the idols, rooting them out of our lives, and coming under the mastery and control of God’s love. When we stop worshipping our God-substitutes and give ourselves over to worshipping God in Christ, we will find our most destructive problems disappearing and significant change taking place.

Reflection

We said above: Our idols are those things we count on to give our lives meaning. They are the things of which we say, “I need this to make me happy” or “If I don’t have this my life is worthless and meaningless.” We say by implication, “Lord, it’s good to have you, but there’s this other thing which I must have or my life is not happy or meaningful. If I can’t have it I will despair. You are not enough. I need this too as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take this from me, I’d turn my back on you. For you are negotiable, but this is not! This is the real goal of my life. If you are not useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you.”

Think about the things that are important to you (for example, friends, career, ministry, family). If God were to take any of them from you, which of them would be ‘too much’ and threaten your ability to trust him?

The role of suffering and mistreatment

It is fairly common for people to suggest that their problems are due to the harm and mistreatment which they have received from others.

First, people do get hurt by others. They have problems which arise from other people’s sins and from living in a fallen world. People are hurt in ways that they do not deserve. They are sinned against, sometimes in the most wicked of ways. It is senseless to deny this. The world is certainly not the way it is supposed to be, and people do not behave in the way they are supposed to behave. People who have suffered from the mistreatment of

⁴ Powlison D. *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*, (P&R, 2003), p. 160.

others deserve to be treated with compassion, understanding and wise counsel. They need to be allowed to grieve the loss of what might have been. They need to be set free to call evil, evil. They need to be empowered to confront others when it is in order. They need to know that it is appropriate to distrust those people who have betrayed their trust. They need to be convinced that God is able to use evil for good.

Second, as significant as the mistreatment may be, it does not excuse our behaviour. It is simply not true that we behave in a certain way because we did not get enough love, were betrayed or were not given proper self-esteem. Powlison writes, “Past events do not cause a craving to be accepted by others any more than current events cause that craving. The occasions of a lust are never its cause.”⁵ The sins of others against us do not cause our behaviour. This would remove our responsibility for our actions and beliefs. We may be victims, but we must also accept blame for our behaviour. It is perfectly appropriate to say that it was wrong for a person to treat us the way that they did. However, it is inappropriate to say that their treatment of us forced us to behave in a certain way or caused us to have particular inordinate desires. Powlison again: “There is no reason why a person serves a particular lust rather than God; sin is irrational and insane.”⁶ Though we should do all that we can to prevent people from experiencing suffering, the individual is still responsible for handling their sufferings in a way that is faithful to God.

Our afflictions may be the context of our behaviour and might create tendencies toward certain behaviours. God may even take them significantly into account when he judges our attitudes and actions. However, denying responsibility for our attitudes and actions is something which we may not legitimately do. *We are, therefore, simultaneously victims and guilty, sinned-against and sinners.*

Reflection

Create a scenario in which someone who has been hurt by others uses this as an excuse for their sinful behaviour. How would you counsel this person? If possible, get into pairs and discuss your scenarios.

Repenting of our idolatries

Reflection

- What is repentance? Try to define it in a sentence.
- Why is the process of repentance so key to gospel change?

⁵ Powlison D. *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*, (P&R, 2003), 155.

⁶ Powlison D. *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*, (P&R, 2003), 153–154.

Repentance and mortification, the classic terms for overcoming sinful habits, are acts which are not well understood by our contemporary culture. However, they are essential if we are effectively to address our problems and find ourselves changed. *Repentance* can be defined as turning from sin, while *mortification* can be defined as putting sin to death. Repentance and mortification must take place at both the behavioural level and at the motivational level. In working on ourselves and on others, we must address both the ‘works of the flesh’ and the ‘lusts of the flesh’, the external and the internal.

The acts of repentance and mortification of sin involve the following:

i. Regular self-examination

We must not only repent of sin generally: we must do so specifically. This requires taking a look at your thoughts and actions at the end of the day and determining specific ways in which you have failed to live a God-pleasing life.

ii. Identifying idols of the heart which underlie specific behaviours

If we are to engage in effective repentance for our idolatries, it is important that we be able to identify them. However, one need not and should not go on introspective ‘idol hunts’. Instead, specific occasions of sin offer an opportunity to reflect on the specific cravings or inordinate desires that rule the heart. For instance, an outburst of anger could have arisen because you demanded the peace of not being interrupted, because you demanded that things go smoothly, or because you demanded respect, and so on. It is important to try to assess what ruling desires are taking the place of our desire to please God. Only then can our repentance and mortification be effective.

Reflection

What is the difference between this approach and ‘idol hunting’?

Someone has said that an idol hunt would be like subjecting yourself to a full medical examination every night, regardless of need. Instead, the approach outlined above could be compared to spotting individual symptoms which identify the presence of an illness and give us the opportunity to treat it.

You might uncover some of your idols by asking the following diagnostic questions⁷:

- If you are angry, ask, “Is there something 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 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?”

⁷ This will be covered in more depth in the Porterbrook module Pastoral Care Part I.

- If you are despondent or hating yourself, ask, “Is there something too important to me? Something 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, but which is not?”

Reflection

How do we excuse sin when we find it in ourselves or others? Consider the following phrases:

“I’m sure anyone would have messed up like that in the same situation...”

“Oh well, never mind, God forgives you...”

“I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as you’re making out. I’m sure you handled it fine.”

“It sounds like the other person behaved much worse than you did so I really wouldn’t worry.”

“We all need to have a good old moan every now and then. Go on, get it off your chest; you can’t help how you feel.”

- Why are statements like this unhelpful? Do they really help people in the process of gospel change?
- Why do we (and others) so frequently use phrases like this? What should we say instead?

iii. Considering the horror of your sins and idols

We must come to see the ugliness of our sins and ruling desires. We must strive to see: the *guilt* of our sin (Christ was put to death for it. Do not dare say, “It’s not so bad”); the *danger* of our sin (if you do not deal with them you will become hardened in them, and they will bring ruin into your life); and, the *evil* of sin (sin grieves the Holy Spirit).

John Owen suggests that we:

look to him whom we have pierced and be in bitterness. Say to your soul, “What have I done? What love, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on? Is this the return I make to the Father for His love, to the Son for His shed blood, to the Holy Spirit for His grace: Is this how I requite the Lord: Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed Spirit has chosen to dwell in? What then can I say to my dear Lord Jesus? Do I account communion with Him of so little value? ... I have despised love, mercy, grace, goodness, peace, joy consolation. I have despised them all as a thing of naught that I might persist in sin.⁸

⁸ Owen J. *The Works of John Owen* (ed. Goold, W.H.; vol. 6; Banner of Truth Trust, 1977)

Reflection

We need to come to the cross mindful of the price that was worth paying for our sins: the Son of God gave up his life for them because they matter so much. But we must never forget that the price has been paid for our sins in full. It is as we come to the cross that we see how much Christ has paid for our sin and also how much it matters.

iv. Putting your sins and idols to death

We sometimes think of human nature as being like a pressure cooker. Sometimes the urge to sin gets so great that we feel like we have to blow off some steam to be healthy. After we have 'sinned a little' we can go back to pleasing God. However, the biblical view of human nature is better likened to a house with mice in the walls. If you are going to get rid of the mice, you do not feed them a little in hopes that by being nice to them they will go away. Instead, you starve them. You do not leave anything around for them to feed on. We are to be ruthless with sin in our life in the same way. We are to know the situations which are especially tempting for us and avoid them. We should forecast our day and be aware of when occasions might arise where we are prone to fall and prepare ourselves for them. We are also to "resist [sin] to the point of shedding blood" (Hebrews 12:4). To treat sin lightly or casually is to make yourself its ongoing victim.

v. Putting on those actions and attitudes which are part of a God-pleasing life

It is not enough to stop sinful behaviours. We must also be engaging in the corresponding positive behaviours. For example, if a 'love for money' had led us to steal, we must not only stop stealing, but also be generous towards others (see Ephesians 4:25–32; this will be discussed further in Units 6–9).

All the above ought to lead one to the conclusion that repentance is far more than saying, "I'm sorry." It can be a slow and painstaking process. However, ultimately it brings life.

vi. Repentance in light of the gospel

As we move on to talk about the discipline of faith, it is important to be aware that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Biblical repentance always involves believing the gospel. Therefore, our repentance is always believing repentance, and our believing is always repentant faith. Repentance always involves turning from idols to Christ as Saviour. Repentance which does not flow out of and lead to faith in Christ is not biblical repentance at all. It is only another work carried out in order to gain merit before God.

Reflection

How would you recognise the difference between repentance and regret, remorse or sorrow?

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11

Fill in the table below with the differences between the two responses:

Godly Sorrow

Worldly Sorrow

How would this help you to recognise the process of true repentance?

Sample