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YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME. Exodus 20:3

It's one of the ten commandments, but probably not one you have thought too much about.

Most of us are too quick to give ourselves a pass when we think about idols. We imagine that worshipping an idol is simply bowing down to a golden statue or burning incense. If we are not doing that, we think we are not in danger of "worshipping idols".

But idols are more subtle than that. John Calvin famously said, "The human heart is a perpetual idol factory." In fact, in our desperate and unguided attempt to make sense of life, we create and pursue idols without hesitation. And yet, idols are unable to fulfil the weight of hope we place upon them. And so they disappoint.

And sometimes they enslave.

The prophet Jeremiah warned: "Do not run until your feet are bare and your throat is dry. But you said, 'It's no use! I love foreign gods, and *I must go after them.*'"

Subtly, yet powerfully, they seduce us into an invisible bondage. And like the proverbial frog in the hot water, they reduce our resistance and weaken our will before we even realise that we have been fooled.

This study will help you avoid such tragedy. To become alert and alive spiritually, you must know your dark tendencies, and immobilise them at the onset. Greater victory and greater joy await those who are willing to see and disarm the idols that seek to fool you.

Done with authentic vulnerability, this study will guide you to a greater understanding of your own soul, and a deeper understanding of the only One worthy of our worship, Jesus Christ.

Brett

Brett Hilliard, *Senior Pastor*

SESSION 1



QUICK FIXES AND IDOLS

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever find it difficult to stay on track with what is best for your life? Do you find, at times, that you drift away from the good you desire for yourself and those you care about? Do you find it hard to stay with what God desires of you?

Regardless of how long we have been Christians or how mature we are in our faith, there are times when it is hard to be sure of what God has designed us to be. We are human. We make mistakes. We are limited. We have some very bad days at times.

God is a good, loving God who cares deeply for us with His presence, comfort, and empowerment, and He has granted us the freedom to make our own choices in life. This means that we may sometimes make the wrong choice. We may fail at times. And at those times, we might decide to take a shortcut and act in a way that we think is best instead of what God wants for us. We often choose a quick fix instead of God's amazing grace and His guidance in truth. We look to quick fixes rather than the more substantive change that is needed. Genuine endeavours give way to counterfeit measures.

Adolescence is a time when we all start to discover more about our bodies, our feelings, and our relationships. We begin to have more confidence in who we are, what we believe, and in what makes us unique. And given that youthful energy is at its peak with hormones raging, our brains not fully developed, and influenced by peers like never before, we can drift away from what is best for us. It is a time of tremendous growth, internal turmoil, and mistakes in behaviour. It is a time when most look for quick fixes.

Even as adults, often with stable jobs and families of our own, the allure of quick fixes can pull us away from the life we are meant to have with God. That's why it is important to consider this issue no matter what life stage we are in and look at ways of overcoming it.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- Think back to your adolescence or an earlier stage in life. What was a quick fix you used in your attempt to overcome a problem or difficult situation? This might even be a funny story looking back on it.
- Share any ideas you have about why we look to quick fixes when faced with problems.

MAIN STUDY

1. QUICK FIXES AND IDOLS

Tim Keller wrote a book in 2009 entitled *Counterfeit Gods*, which was the genesis for this study. Tim Keller is a gifted writer who used his incredible mind to speak about the financial crisis, which was impacting his world at that time, as he pastored Redeemer church in New York City.

While he did not use the term “quick fix”, he addressed the way we all tend to find counterfeit solutions for what we really need. We often pursue things that are filled with empty promises.

In order to apply Biblical material and theological truth, Keller uses the term “idol”. He defines an idol as:

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.

Other helpful ways to define an idol would be anything that drives your life or turning a good thing into your ultimate thing.

- Think for a moment, what really drives your life? What tends to control your life? Is there any good thing that has become far too important to you?

2. THE REALITY AND FUNCTION OF IDOLS

When the apostle Paul wrote his most thorough theological letter, *Romans*, he states a central spiritual concept for our study. This was so important to him that he shapes it in a sequence repeated three times. In order for you to see this, the passage in *Romans* 1:22-28 is formatted for clarity:

²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised. [Amen]

²⁶Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.

²⁸Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

Humanity is shown, in the hard reality of replacing the truth God has revealed with idols and quick fixes. God reacts to the human decision to turn from Him by consigning to them the natural consequences of their actions.

Sadly, we all fall into destructive patterns of trusting and following what is counterfeit to that which we were designed for in the depths of our souls. When we turn to any created thing to give us meaning and happiness, which only God can give fully, these things will ultimately fail to deliver and break down. Every quick fix, idol, counterfeit item that can be chosen will eventually work against us.

- Dialogue in open and honest ways about what Paul is proclaiming. Share any convictions or questions this raises for you.

3. THE VARIETY OF IDOLS

Quick fixes and idols are a sad reality of our world. They are everywhere. They typically start with something that is basically healthy or natural but are then taken to an extreme. They are taken to an extreme that can be destructive.

Let's look at some major classifications of idols.

Sex is an idol society recognises and often even promotes. The porn industry constantly grows. Our culture promotes sex and people idolise sex.

Money is an obvious idol in some people's lives. Once someone defines their life by how much money they make or how much they have, they will never be satisfied.

Success, or working harder and more competitively than others, can be as addictive as drug or alcohol abuse. Individuals can often place success and profits over their relationships with other people.

Power is fleeting. People in power tend to fear losing it and have anxiety about how to maintain it. This is not only a personal idol but is too often a national idol.

Happiness is something we all desire. But if the ultimate goal is to be happy, this can lead to being a workaholic, being too demanding of your family, or spending too many hours at the gym.

Religion can become toxic. People begin to think they are better than others and focus their whole existence around doing religious activities.

Individualism has become an area of idolatry. The "self" outweighs all other matters.

- Which of these are part of the Hong Kong culture? Share any insights or stories that might be helpful.

4. IDENTIFY YOUR IDOLS

Let's get more personal. For each of us to remain faithful to the living God, who revealed Himself on the cross, we need to determine the idols in our own lives. We may not like to admit to personal idols, but it is important to reflect on your life with honesty.

How do you identify your personal idols? Try thinking about what you pay the most attention to every day, what you spend your time doing, and what you spend your money on.

- What do you routinely think about that gives you comfort or confidence?
- What do you spend your money on or time doing?
- What occupies your mind when you have spare time on your hands?

- Read over this list and select one that you sometimes struggle with as a possible idol. Share something about this with the group.

We all tend toward some favourite quick fix when we have rough times. Even good things can become so central or essential to our lives that we think we can't live without it. In these cases, the true God is replaced with a false god. Here is a list of some of the more common ones:

Romantic love	Comfortable living	Self-expression
Possessions or wealth	Intellectual achievement	Emotional dependence
Access to social circles	Hard work	Vocational success
Health and fitness	Personal affluence	Morality
Physical beauty	Duty and responsibility	Academic advancement
Peer approval	Family relationships	Fame

- Share which one of these, or one not listed, that you have overused in the past as a personal idol.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

C.S. Lewis was a prolific writer and quotable theologian. Read this quote and share your thoughts and feelings on it:

"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

PERSONAL APPLICATION

REPLACING YOUR IDOLS

One of the best ways to counter any kind of quick fix or false belief is to equip your hearts and minds with God's truth. Biblical faith is clear on many truths about who you are. Here are some of them:

- I am a child of God (John 1:12)
 - I am a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)
 - Jesus is my friend (John 15:15)
 - My body is God's temple; the Holy Spirit dwells in me (1 Corinthians 3:16)
 - I am holy in God's eyes (1 Corinthians 1:2, Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2)
 - I am chosen by God (1 Peter 2:9)
 - My sins are forgiven (Colossians 1:14)
 - God has given me the spirit of power, love, and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7)
- Which one of these is most important for you to remember at this time? As you share with others, it would be helpful to read the corresponding scripture out loud.

Quick fixes and all earthly idols will sooner or later disappoint. It is only God's gracious love for us and His gift of Christ and the Spirit that leads to genuine fulfilment. The coming sessions will assist in helping you set your hearts and minds of Jesus Christ and His comforting, enabling presence.



SESSION 2

FROM COMFORT TO CALLED



INTRODUCTION

The idol of comfort can sometimes be hard to identify. On the surface, we might simply think that it points to someone who worships the comforts in life: a nice house, a fast car, luxurious vacations, and club memberships. When we define the idol of comfort in that way it often leads to unwarranted guilt and shame over the wealth and luxuries that God has blessed us with. So, you like vacations and Michelin-star restaurants, does that make comfort your idol? Or perhaps you live simply and give away your wealth, does that mean the idol of comfort does not affect you?

The hope of this study is to dig beneath the surface of what it means to worship the idol of comfort, because comfort is much more insidious and pervasive than we might expect. It affects every economic bracket no matter how rich or poor you are, and most of the time it doesn't even have to do with materialism.

Only in identifying the root of this idol can we begin searching for a legitimate remedy.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- A “guilty pleasure” is something you love to treat yourself with even though it might not be the best thing for you. What is your favourite “guilty pleasure” in life?

- If you had a million dollars that you had to spend today (you can't save it) how would you use it?

MAIN STUDY

1. DEFINING COMFORT

What exactly is comfort? Typically, we define it as being free from physical or emotional distress. So, to be “comforted” means to be brought into a state of being free from pain. This is usually done through consolation.

However, the meaning of “comfort” as it is used in the Bible carries a different emphasis. In Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, He says “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4) The original Greek word for “comforted” is *parakaleo*; *para* means “alongside” and *kaleo* means “to call”. So, a literal translation of the word is “call alongside.” When we need comfort we are literally calling someone to come alongside our pain.

Even the usage of the word “comfort” in the Old Testament carries a different emphasis. The Hebrew word is *נחם* (*Naham*), which emphasises the idea of encouragement and strengthening. The biblical usage of the word is this: finding encouragement and strength by calling people alongside our pain. Isn’t that interesting?

In particular, the source of that strength is God Himself. When we call upon the Lord to walk alongside us, we are strengthened and encouraged by being in His very presence. That is how the idea of “comfort” is used in the Bible.

● How does this definition change your understanding of comfort?

● What is it about being in someone’s presence that brings comfort?

2. MISPLACED COMFORT

If comfort is finding encouragement by being in the presence of God, then sadly most of us are not finding true comfort, because we have sought that strength in other places. We are not alone in doing this, in fact the Apostle Paul did the exact same thing. Let’s see what he wrote in the book of Philippians.

⁴ *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:*

⁵ *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* Philippians 3:4-6

Circumcision was an act performed on every new born Jewish male eight days after they were born. This was a commandment that God gave in Genesis 17:10-12. It was given to the Israelites as a sign of their covenant with God, that they would be His chosen descendants, and He would be their God. If Paul truly had anything to be comforted by, it was that he had the sign of the covenant. Additionally, he kept every law. The Pharisees were known to have kept to the law as tightly as possible. They even made additional laws to ensure that the commands of God weren’t broken. This righteousness led Paul to persecute anyone who appeared to break the law: the Christians. What Paul is saying is that he found a lot of comfort in the righteousness he was able to achieve.

● Take a few minutes to write down various things that bring you comfort.

● What things in your life give you “confidence”? In other words, what do you aspire to achieve?

● Why do those things bring you comfort? What pain does it alleviate?

3. REALIGNING COMFORT

Many of us would love to say that we find our comfort in God. The reality is that we actually find our comfort in other things: success, wealth, education, influence, impact, fame, etc. Consequently, those become the things that we strive for in life. The question then becomes: how do we actually begin to place our comfort in God? The Apostle Paul gives us a hint.

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. Philippians 3:7-9

Some experts choose to translate the word “garbage” as “dung”. I like that, because it gives it more emphasis! Everything that Paul staked his life upon and strove for he suddenly considers as “dung”. The moment he put his trust in Jesus, all his accomplishments as a religious Jew meant nothing to him. He thought it gave him meaning and purpose in life, but it was nothing more than “dung” compared to the unbelievable truth that he was justified by the Son of God.

- What would it take for you to consider your current accomplishments as dung?

- Paul considers everything loss because knowing Jesus meant more to him. Why is it hard for us to truly believe that Jesus is of surpassing worth?

Optional activity: On a roll of toilet paper on individual sheets, write out all the things you consider as a comfort in your life. Then take some time to meditate on what you have written before flushing these down the toilet.

FROM COMFORT TO CALLED

If we take the biblical definition of “comfort” to heart, we realise that we have been created as creatures of comfort. We were designed to seek strength and encouragement in the presence of God. However, sin invaded the world and caused us to seek strength and encouragement in other avenues of life.

When we say we worship the idol of comfort, that might be overly simplistic. We worship the objects that give us comfort, not comfort itself. The remedy is not to reject wealth and all pleasures in life, but instead to discover the true source of comfort and then to pursue Him. Read what Paul wrote to conclude his discourse:

¹⁰I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3: 10-14

What was the goal that Paul was striving for? The key is in the beginning of verse 10, where Paul says “I want to know Christ.” The whole thrust of this passage is centred around knowing Jesus! If you remember, earlier in the passage Paul says that everything is loss compared to the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus...” Is it really that simple? We find ultimate comfort in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This is not mere intellectual knowledge either, but also an intimate relationship with Him. I could know all the biographical facts about a famous celebrity, but I can’t claim to know him if I don’t have relationship.

- Think about your most intimate relationship (best friend, parent, spouse, etc.), what are the things you do to try and grow that relationship?

- How are you trying to strive to know Jesus?

So, to ultimately find comfort we must know Jesus. That seems pretty simple, but read what Jesus says about knowing Him.

²¹“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”
Matthew 7:21-23

How are we to know God and be known by Him? By doing the will of the Father. Jesus says in Matthew 22 that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love others. To find true comfort, we actually have to follow God’s will of loving Him and loving others. Doing so will ironically lead to pain and persecution. However, this is a call that is made to every Christian.

- Take a few minutes to examine your heart. Are you willing to follow God’s call on your life? What is keeping you from doing so?

- End your time by praying for strength and encouragement to follow God’s call on your life.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

C. S. Lewis in the section on “Hope” in the book, *Mere Christianity*, states:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

We have seen that we are designed as creatures of comfort, that is, to find strength by being in the presence of the Lord. The issue however, is that most of us find comfort in the presence of other things. Here are some guiding questions to help us discern those other places we have wrongly placed our comfort in.

- Tim Keller says that “The true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention.” What occupies your mind when there’s nothing else to think about?

- Is there something so important that you must have at all costs? Is there something that you must have in order to be fulfilled and significant?

- Matthew 6:21 states: “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.” Think over where you spend most of your money. Would adjustments be helpful?

SESSION 3



INTRODUCTION

"With great power comes great responsibility."

Most of us have heard this centuries-old saying, made popular by the Spider-Man movies. In fact, most of us give this principle a nod of affirmation without thinking twice. It just makes sense, right? If the world is to be just and to be good, which we want, it's necessary for those with power to steward it wisely.

Assuming we can agree with the above, it's this next question which most of us might have left unexplored. Whose power? We typically think about leaders, politicians, supervisors, parents, and those we find physically intimidating.

But what about you? Have you ever heard that quote, and considered your own power? You may chuckle as you consider your own name and "power" being used in the same sentence, and that's OK. But, Scripture speaks of a powerful God who created this world, and entrusted His people with the power to help sustain the world, that is, create the world that is to be.

If you are created by God, then you, by design, have power.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- What's an inanimate object that has some power over you? (think of some unhealthy food you love, a Korean drama you're obsessed with, a phobia, a fitness goal, etc.)

- Can you describe a light-hearted moment in life when you felt you had lots of power? This could be as an older sibling, when you held a position of power in school or a club, had information that other desperately wanted.

- Do you want more power in your life? (Answer: Yes, of course.)

MAIN STUDY

Pay attention to this story of power as it's traced throughout four foundational scenes of the biblical narrative:

- The story of power starts in the beginning. With a word, and without human help, God effortlessly created all we know.
- The great rescue of the Old Testament, the Exodus, happened in a similar fashion, not by the Israelites strength, but by God's mighty hand.
- The great rescue of the New Testament, our salvation, also echoes this pattern of divine power and humans as the passive recipients of what God's power attained.
- Lastly, the final great work, the redemption and renewal of all creation as described in Revelation will be completed much like it began... by God's power and with God's children as the recipients of a beautiful, eternal life.

The story is consistent, God is the source of power and we often reap the benefits of His benevolent expression of it. With that gift also comes a duty, a call to recognise and respond to the One who used His power to bless.

Let's look at this through the lens of creation as Paul describes it in Romans.

For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. Romans 1:20

God's existence and power have been made manifest to all through His creation, and in most cases, people have failed to respond. Thus, Paul says in the next verse...

For although they knew God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him. Romans 1:21

1. OUR FIRST CALL IS TO RECOGNISE THE SOURCE OF POWER

This is simple, but think about the foundational pieces of a strong faith that come from rightly recognising God as Creator. We get a proper perspective of awe, humility, respect, and wonder to name a few.

- What does experiencing the power of God through creation elicit in you?

We as humans are God's creation as well. And in a similar fashion, if we fail to recognise God as our Creator and the source of all we have, there will be ill effects.

- What are some effects on a person's character and perspective who fails to recognise God as the source of their life, intellect, or talents?

Idol worship often begins with one of two errors. Either we applaud ourselves as the source for all we have, or we glorify human achievement without the recognition of God's contribution. Essentially, we experience awe here on earth, but fail to rightly direct that awe also towards heaven. Recognising God as the source of power and provision is the first step to dethroning our idol of power.

2. THE SECOND CALL IS TO RECOGNISE HOW GOD USES HIS POWER

Listen to how Jesus responds to a request from a couple of disciples that focused on positions of power.

⁴²Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:42-45

- How would you describe Jesus's view of His power and how He believed He was called to steward it?

- Why do you think Jesus felt His followers had the same responsibility?

PERSONAL APPLICATION

As you work to discover what power you have and how it could potentially be an idol in your life, take time to work through the following statements, by first answering some of these personally and privately, and then choosing one to share with the group.

- When I have an unhealthy desire for more power, it shows itself by _____.
- I usually resort to _____ as a quick fix instead of empowering others or seeking their thriving.
- I've seen a godly model of power exhibited through _____.
- Describe what it looks for you to use your relational, spiritual or positional authority (power) when you're healthy. Describe what it looks like when you're unhealthy.
- Think of a specific relationship at work or at home and finish these statements:
 - I make (insert name) feel powerless when I _____.
 - I empower (insert name) when I _____.



SESSION 4



INTRODUCTION

God created us to be social beings. We are meant to live in communities. We are meant to help one another, not just for food and physical safety, but also for relationships and meaning. The fact is we need one another. We want others to appreciate and value us, and that means the way other people see us is important.

This happens from an early age. Starting with our parents and siblings – and later friends and classmates – we grow up learning how to relate to others so that they will like us. Some of our earliest tears were probably shed because other people wouldn't play with us!

The need to be affirmed, valued, and liked is part and parcel of being created in the image of God. There is nothing wrong with it. But just like food and sex, sometimes too much of a good thing can be bad. A healthy dosage of affirmation and approval helps develop healthy relationships. However, when all that we can think about is what people think of us or, when we do whatever it takes to earn their approval, it turns us into approval addicts.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- Why is receiving approval so important? Share one positive memory where someone's affirmation or approval helped build up your confidence or overcome self-doubt.

- Do any of the following statements describe you? Share briefly what it looks like when these things happen.
 - a. Frequently checking how many "likes" you have on social media and comparing yours with others
 - b. Having a tendency to say "yes" when you really want to say "no"
 - c. Being preoccupied with what other people may be thinking about you
 - d. Fulfilling others' expectations even if it means ignoring your own needs
 - e. Finding it hard to voice contrary opinions or disagree with others

MAIN STUDY

Today we look at the quick fix of seeking approval from others to meet a need that only God can truly satisfy.

People who exhibit an unhealthy tendency of approval seeking often display an excess concern of how others think of them. They are driven by a desire to please others. Their sense of self-worth is determined by how people treat them, or what they believe others think of them. Some may even go so far as to do whatever they can to gain approval, even at the risk of compromising their personal convictions, values and time.

1. SYMPTOMS OF NEEDING A QUICK FIX OF APPROVAL

- Which of the following words do you think may be used to describe people who seek approval in unhealthy ways?

Insecurity

Anger

Controlling

Fear of rejection

Jealousy

People-pleasing

Easily offended

- Can you think of someone you know who exhibits one or more of these traits? How do these traits affect them?

2. BENEATH THE SURFACE OF SEEKING APPROVAL

Of the following statements explaining why people seek approval in unhealthy ways, which ones do you think are most important?

- “I want to please you so that you will like me.”
- “I want you to like me. It makes me feel good about myself.”
- “If you don’t like what I do, I will be in trouble.”
- “My life will be meaningful only when I live up to your expectation.”
- “I want to please you so that you will like me. Then, you will give me what I truly want from you.”

3. LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES FOR APPROVAL

In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller talks about how human beings elevate things to the level of being idols. This includes money, sex, and power, among many other things. Approval is another thing that has the potential to become an idol.

Human beings have the tendency to take something good and turn it into the ultimate thing that must be pursued above anything else. In other words, we deify them as the centre of our lives. We mistakenly think that if only we have them, our lives will be fulfilled and meaningful.

However, while idols can absorb our hearts, they will always betray us. Idols never give us the satisfaction we want them to offer. Chasing a quick fix will only leave us wanting. Here are three possible outcomes:

- **Draining** – you spend enormous amount of time and energy to seek approval by doing what others want you to do. In the end, you neglect things that are truly important to you.
- **Diminishing** – by trying to become what others want you to be, your own need is often neglected, and you gradually lose the real you.
- **Disappointing** – you can never please everybody no matter how hard you try. In the end, you are left disappointed with both “them” and yourself!

- Do you have any comments about this that would be helpful to share with the group?

4. APPROVAL AND THE STORY OF THE UNWANTED WIFE

In the Old Testament, there is a sad story about a wife who tried her best to gain her husband’s approval. She is not famous, but her husband is.

Jacob is one of the most important patriarchs of ancient Israel. In fact, he is later given the name of Israel. His 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob’s wife Rachel was the love of his life. However, Rachel was his second wife. Jacob’s father-in-law tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah first before giving his second daughter Rachel to Jacob. (You can read more of this fascinating story in Genesis 29).

Leah was stuck. She had a husband, but her husband never wanted to marry her. She didn’t have his heart. She didn’t have his approval. So, what should she do? She did the only thing that she could: make babies, and lots of them!

Here is what Leah said after giving birth to the first three babies.

After the first baby:

She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." Genesis 29:32

After the second baby:

"Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, He gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Genesis 29:33

After the third baby:

"Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So, he was named Levi. Genesis 29:34

- Can you speculate how Leah was feeling during this process and what was she trying to do by having lots of children?

5. THE BREAKTHROUGH FOR NEEDING A QUICK FIX OF APPROVAL

There is no indication that the children helped her earn Jacob's approval. Leah's strategy of gaining approval didn't work out as she wanted. Surprisingly, we do however detect a change of heart on Leah's side, rather than on Jacob's side.

Here is what Leah said after the fourth baby:

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." So, she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. Genesis 29:35

- What do you think changed in Leah's heart?
- What does "this time I will praise the Lord" say about Leah? Why was it life changing for her?

ADDITIONAL INSIGHT

Here is one way that seeking approval may never work. Look at how the five steps interlink with one another.

1. I have a need in my heart
2. Another person's approval is the solution to my need
3. I will do everything to secure their approval
4. They disappoint me
5. I am useless – **I still need approval**

The key to break the cycle is to cut the tie between step 1 and 2. We need to allow God's Truth to renew our thinking (Romans 12:1-2). Other human beings can never fulfil the role that only God can perform. Insisting someone or something can play the role of God is nothing short of making them idols. Here is a "renewed" cycle:

1. I have a need in my heart
2. God's approval is the solution to my need
3. I don't need to do anything to secure His approval
4. God will never disappoint me
5. I am special to God – **I am approved**

PERSONAL APPLICATION

We know that God has created us as beings who need community. There is nothing wrong with seeking approval, but when we base our self-worth on the approval from other human beings, we turn them into gods. Approval addiction may range from seeking to please others to being controlled by how others think about us, and even to deceptively controlling others through our people-pleasing behaviours in order to get what we want from them.

- Even if you are not overwhelmed with "approval seeking," what is one way that this study has been helpful to you personally?
- What is the one key takeaway for you on your behaviour?

MAIN STUDY

“Idols give us a sense of being in control, and we can locate them by looking at our worst nightmares.” Counterfeit Gods

Some idols are right under our nose, like the idol of control. Instead of looking for secondary idols that promise control, we can look right to the instigator and culprit itself: the idol of control.

For this study, we will look at a collection of Biblical stories to see the identity and influence of the idol of control. This first surfaces in the Garden of Eden at the moment of the Fall. Keep in mind that we are identifying the idol of control as rejecting God’s plan; manipulating the outcome so that things go our way.

Read Genesis 3:1-6

¹[The serpent] said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” ² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

- In this passage, what is God’s plan? What did Eve do and what did she think would happen if she followed her own way?

Next, we turn to the story of Jonah. It’s probably a familiar one to many. If we look closer, we can see the idol of control in Jonah’s life. Read from Jonah 1 here:

¹Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me.” ³But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

- What is happening in this story? What is Jonah’s reaction to God’s message? What are some reasons for this? (Hint: Nineveh was a powerful city and was the capital of Assyria, which was a fierce nation and one of Israel’s greatest enemies.)

- How could you see the idol of control at work in Jonah’s reaction?

Jonah doesn’t like God’s command (to prophesy to the Ninevites) and the possible outcome (their repentance and change of heart, and God’s mercy). He doesn’t agree with God’s sovereign plan for Nineveh and for him, so he gets his own way (to flee from God and His calling) and controls the situation by running away from God. What follows is the familiar story of him being cast overboard into a stormy sea, then being swallowed and rescued by a whale. Jonah says a prayer of thankfulness to the Lord for saving him, then the Lord gives him the same command again. So, let’s read from Jonah chapter 3 and 4:

***3** ¹Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ³Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*

⁶When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles... ⁸Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened.

4 ¹*But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.* ²*He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.* ³*Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* ⁴*But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”*

- Do you think Jonah had a right to be angry? Even when things don’t go the way he wants (such as when Nineveh repents and God has mercy on them), how does Jonah try to exert some measure of control?

Now, let’s turn our attention to Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane moments before His arrest and eventual crucifixion, recorded in Luke 22:

³⁹*Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed Him.* ⁴⁰*On reaching the place, He said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.”* ⁴¹*He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,* ⁴²*“Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.”* ⁴³*An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.* ⁴⁴*And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

- If Jesus could have had His way, what would it have been? This is very human, right? And we know that Jesus was fully human. In this situation, what might Jonah have done? What about most people?
- Discuss Jesus’s attitude in the second part of His prayer in verse 42. This part of Jesus’s prayer, “not My will but Yours be done,” is short and easy to remember. Can you see how memorising this could be powerful for you?

To destroy the idol of control, we have to give up control. To give up control is to surrender, which is not easy. It means wilfully laying down our own plans, our own ways and our desire to control. Some people resist surrendering because they associate it with defeat and failure. It takes great security in one’s identity in order to surrender and not be in control.

Let’s conclude with Mark 1:

⁹*At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.* ¹⁰*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove.* ¹¹*And a voice came from heaven: “You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.”*

Notice who is “in control” of the baptism and where Jesus get His security from.

- How might that help you in situations where you want to be in control?
- What are other healthy sources for our security and identity? Share any Scriptures that come to mind.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHT

Many people like the hymn “All to Jesus I Surrender”:

*All to Jesus, I surrender; All to Him I freely give
I will ever love and trust Him; in His presence daily live.
I surrender all, I surrender,
All to Thee, my blessed Saviour, I surrender all.*

How does this chorus point the way to an antidote for control? If you have time, find the entire hymn and read the lyrics or sing it together. You can also think of other worship songs about the idea of surrender and submission.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Look over the following questions to help you apply this study of control to your life, and any way that the quick fix of control might be active.

- Do you give people a lot of “should” and “oughts” – unsolicited advice, suggestions, and constructive criticism?
 - Do you dislike depending on others, accepting help from them, or allowing them to do things for you?
 - Do you over-plan simple activities?
 - Do you insist on being right, having things done your way, or having the final word?
 - Do you find it difficult to admit making mistakes, being wrong or misinformed about something, or acknowledging that you’ve changed your mind?
- As you feel comfortable, share one of these or any personal insight gained in this study.

If you are aware of areas of your life where you are depending too much on being in control in unhealthy ways, ask the Holy Spirit help you identify these more clearly so you can take down the idol of control. Here is a Scripture to assist you:

*“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and **self-control**.” Galatians 5:22-23*

Self-control is one of the marks of a Christ-follower. When understood and practised in context with the other fruit of the Spirit, self-control honours God and is a blessing to others.



SESSION 6



COMPLETE IN CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

“You complete me!”

This famous line from the 1996 movie “Jerry Maguire” immediately became a popular phrase. A man could use it, like Tom Cruise did, to sweep his sweetheart off her feet. It’s a bit cheesy, but the vulnerability of the line so disarms us that we may even believe we are not complete until we find that special someone.

We don’t live in a two-hour Hollywood production, but these views too often shape our beliefs. We need to be careful about our view of being complete. If you look at the people around you who fell madly in love and got married, do they look complete to you? Or, if you know a single friend who is content and happy with their life, are they not complete without a special someone?

What does it actually mean to be complete? Do we need someone else to make us complete? Without someone else, am I only 50% complete?

For some of us, when we don’t feel complete or if we feel lonely and sense the one we’re with is not fulfilling their role, we may turn to fashion, gadgets, watches, jewellery, luxury items and even fantasies to fill the gap and try to make us feel better. That’s happened to you at some point, right?

Being complete is a worthy goal. But is it possible? This session will help us grapple with what it means to be complete.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- When was the last time you felt really great and 100% complete as you are? In your family, in your occupation, in friendships or even in a romantic relationship? When was it that you were most appreciated, acknowledged, or honoured?
- When was the last time you felt unworthy or lacking in some way? When did you experience failure, rejection, anxiety and being looked down upon?

MAIN STUDY

The Biblical message is that God makes us complete through His provision of Christ. God tells us that when we are in Him with Christ living in us, we can be truly satisfied as complete. God and Christ are enough! Period.

When we are in Christ, we learn “to be content whatever the circumstances... whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Philippians 4:11-12

The fact is that, for the believer, when you are in Christ you are completed by Him. The prophet Isaiah echoes the Christian truth when he says, “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of His righteousness.” Isaiah 61:10

In order to experience being complete in Christ, it helps tremendously to recognise three central matters. Let’s explore these.

1. RECOGNISE THE WORLD’S DECEPTION

That’s right, the world has deceptive elements. Most of us easily recognise big deceptions, although we can vastly disagree on what is deceptive and what is not. Likewise, most of us have difficulty recognising more subtle deceptions until they get the better of us. We live in a world filled with all kinds of deceptive elements. The Biblical writer Paul says,

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.”

Colossians 2:8

The word captive in the original Greek has the imagery of being kidnapped or taken hostage. Hopefully you have never been kidnapped, but it is likely you know what it means to have your thoughts held hostage by false teaching, deceptive ideas, or spiritual nonsense. This captivity can be just as hard to break as if you were physically captured.

Deceptive philosophies are ideas that promise you everything and give you absolutely nothing in the end. Just as some people believe they will be complete when they find Mr. or Mrs. Right, all kinds of promising philosophies and intriguing ideas or promotions can leave many people feeling lost and frustrated.

- Share an example of some philosophy or deceitful teaching that has negatively impacted you or someone you know. Do you have an example of something that has left you or others empty when at first it seemed so promising?

- Can you think of a human tradition or idea that you adhered to, which you have since found to actually be unbiblical?

2. RECOGNISE GOD’S WISDOM AND THE PROVISION OF CHRIST

Paul, who was an early apostle, wrote some powerful words to the early church at Corinth. Read over Paul’s writing aloud a few times:

¹⁸For the Word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

When we think more deeply about it, doesn’t it seem odd that we sometimes choose the wisdom of the world over God’s wisdom, when God was the one that created the world? How can the created be wiser than the Creator? The ancient Greeks were renowned for their philosophy, but because of their own pride, they neglected and even laughed at the wisdom of God and His saving Grace.

God’s wisdom for us is found in the personhood of Jesus Christ. It is not just a philosophy. Jesus is fully God and fully man. He walked the earth, and only through Him personally can we find the way, the truth, and the life.

God’s wisdom is better than ours!

- Was there a time in your life that you thought you were making a wise decision that then turned out to be unwise?

- Share one experience in which you chose God's wisdom and benefited from it, perhaps after some struggle with worldly wisdom or advice from others.

3. RECOGNISE THAT GOD COMPLETES YOU!

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority." Colossians 2:9-10

Paul states emphatically that, in Christ Jesus, God completes you! Not your mates, not your spouse, not anything in this world but Himself. God has forgiven your past, present and future sin. You have been bought with the price of His only begotten son Jesus!

Your salvation is complete. He is the head over every power and authority. You do not need to look somewhere else to be healed, to find self-help, to find redemption or fulfilment. We all need guidance and help in this life, but the fact remains that Jesus by dying on the cross for us has completely washed away all of our iniquities.

God counts us as sinless before Him because Jesus has paid it all. Therefore, we are complete in Him, perfect and without any blemish. We have complete salvation, we don't need anyone else or anything in this world to give us false eternal hope because everyone and everything will eventually fade away. The only thing that we can fully rely on are our promises in Jesus Christ.

- How have you looked for someone or something to complete you in the past? What happened?

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

The following verse sheds light on an additional perspective of being complete in Christ.

"Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." Psalm 37:4

The fact is that the more we grow to be complete in Christ, the more joy and delight we have.

- Think of someone you know that seems to radiate joy and delight in God and their life in Christ. Share a characteristic of this person with group.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

As you work to discover what it means to be complete in Christ and how easily one can substitute people or things in life rather than be fulfilled by Jesus, complete the following statements and choose one to share with the group.

- I have the tendency to put my hope in _____ to make me feel complete.
- Rather than seeking Christ as the centre of my life, I tend to use _____ as a quick fix.
- I tend to be tempted or deceived by a belief that _____, and this can inhibit me from completeness in Christ.
- One way I can be disciplined or more creative in abiding in Christ daily would be _____.



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