

# Taking Idols Into Your Hearts

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[0:00] Amen. We're reading together from the Bible, from the Old Testament, Ezekiel chapter 14, verses 1 to 11 this morning, and we're going to read this text together. One of our elders, Hamish, is going to come and read for us, and then Ryan Acres is going to come and preach.

Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and said before me, and the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and yet comes to the prophet, I, the Lord, will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are all estranged from me through their idols.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him, I, the Lord, will answer him myself. And I will set my face against that man.

I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the midst of my people, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people, Israel. And they shall hear their punishment. The punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike, that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves any more with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. We've been looking in the book of Daniel over the last several weeks and been talking about how God's people are in exile during this time in the land of Babylon. They are being judged for their sin and their rebellion and idolatry against the Lord.

And so he sent the nation of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar to come and bring judgment on the Israelites. Corey has talked about how there were three deportations and Daniel was in that first deportation around 605 BC. So we've been focusing on that time period of the people of God living in exile and how exile is being away from where God wants us to be and being in a place where we're not living in a place we're meant to be. We're going to make a small detour for today to look at a passage in Ezekiel because Ezekiel was also a prophet during that time. Ezekiel was a part of the second deportation in 597 BC. So roughly about eight years after Daniel and his friends were deported. He was a prophet to the Israelites, to the people of Judah in Babylon. And so all this is kind of taking place during the first part of the events of the book of Daniel. And Ezekiel is telling us the message that God was giving to his people directly while they were in Babylon. So one of the things that has been just a major focus during the time of Daniel, but also you see this throughout the prophets, is this idea of idolatry. And one of the things that Corey had mentioned a few weeks ago is that this time in history was a time and an age when idols seemed to rule. And so he explained to us that idolatry is seeking for something to fulfill you in a way that only God can. We may say it like this, that idolatry is loving something more than you love God. It's really trusting in something to come through for you in a way that only God can. And so we're going to be talking about idolatry this morning and taking idols into our hearts based on what this passage is telling us. Now, I'm probably not going to say anything that you haven't already heard. Probably no new material this morning. But if that's the case, I think we need to ask ourselves the question, why is it that the Lord keeps allowing me to hear this message? Why is it that if I'm hearing this over and over, this is not new, why does the Lord want me to wrestle with this? So I think that's a challenge for us today. So let's dive into our passage. Hamish read verses one through three says this, then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me and the word of the Lord came to me, son of man. These men have taken their idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Basically what has happened is the elders of Israel have come to Ezekiel to hear a word from the Lord. This is probably happening around the time of 592 BC. So roughly 13 years after the things we've been talking about at the beginning of Daniel.

[5:59] But the elders are coming to consult Ezekiel, who is the prophet, despite their unfaithfulness to God, despite the fact that they have been being judged because of their idolatry, they're still coming to God as like a form of religion. There's some practice of orthodoxy, you might say, in what they're doing.

Yet, as we'll see, is their heart is not actually towards the Lord. So they're coming to the prophet probably to get a word of encouragement, probably hoping to get some kind of good news that God's going to send a message that they're going to destroy Babylon any day now kind of thing. But they're coming to the Lord hoping to hear a word. Now in verse 2 it says that the Lord actually spoke to them. God could have been silent at this point. The people deserve to hear nothing from God.

I know a lot of times as people we will instinctively use the silent treatment when we're upset with someone. And I think we can kind of project that on the Lord as well. Like I've done some things that displease Him, so I know He's not listening to me. And the Lord is certainly not going to speak to me today at church or not speak to me today in my time in the Word. We just expect that the Lord would treat us as we treat other people. But the Lord actually in His kindness is going to speak to His people. God had every right to say, I'm done with you. But instead we get a different message. So the elders, they come and they consult. They want to consult from the Lord. And essentially what they're doing is they're coming in there, what the passage talks about, their multitude of idols. They're still worshiping other gods. They're still holding on to their idols. But they're also inquiring of the Lord.

In other words, they're treating the Lord as if He's just one God among many. And God is going to show them that that is absolutely not going to happen because He is not one God among many. He is the Lord.

So they've been practicing idolatry continually, and they're just treating God just like He's some other small g God. Look at verse 4. The Lord says, therefore speak to them and say to them, thus says the Lord God, any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and yet comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him as he comes with his multitude of idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of those of the house of Israel who are all estranged from me through their idols. So the Lord has a word for them. And what He's telling them is, you have taken these idols into your heart and this stumbling block of iniquity you have put before your face. In other words, He's telling them, you have set your heart's desires, you've set your values, the things that would cause you to make decisions, the things that you really value. You have put that on false gods, and now you're coming to me. But what you don't realize that you've done is you've set before your face, you've put your focus on something that's causing you to trip up. It's a stumbling block. It's something that is not even good for you, although you've trusted it to be good for you. And what we learn here is as God is addressing them is that idolatry is more than just an outward action, but it is a matter of the heart. You've taken idols into your hearts, He said. Idolatry is when at a heart level, in a practical way, you are trusting in something else to fulfill you. When you're trusting something to come through for you or to rescue you, to give you a sense of meaning and purpose, maybe it's security and stability. But when you're looking to something other than God to do that for you, this is why we say that it's loving something more than you love God, because it is a matter of the heart. And we can do this with good things, not just bad things. These are things that might be good gifts of the Lord, but when we love and desire the gifts more than we desire the giver. So when he's talking here about you come with your multitude of idols and yet you're inquiring of me, it's a very similar theme of what we hear of no one can serve two masters. You're trying to live on that, might say in common vernacular, live on the fence with one foot over here and one foot over there. You're having is what the Bible would say a divided heart.

[10:44] Now, a word picture that we often get for the Lord's relationship with us is one of marriage. It's a common theme throughout the Bible. And so imagine there is a husband or a wife that has been unfaithful to their spouse and yet they still try to come to their spouse for intimacy. When we see this portrayed in novels or movies, we instinctively know that this is not okay. It makes us angry and we long for that person to be found out and for the right thing to happen, for justice to happen. And God says, this is how you're treating me. You're being unfaithful and I'm supposed to be like your husband.

I'm supposed to be your spouse. We understand that this is like the ultimate betrayal, the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate thing that someone should be ashamed about. And that's the picture that the Lord gives us of idolatry. We have treated him as one would be unfaithful to their spouse.

Yet look at verse five. God says, I'm going to do these things that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are all estranged from me through their idols. The Lord is saying he's going to answer them. He's going to be direct with them in order that he may lay a hold of the hearts of the house of Israel. Think about this for a second, that this is the one, God is the one who has been sinned against in ways that are just unfathomable throughout Israel's history. They're supposed to be faithful to him. He's been very clear on what faithfulness looks like. Yet over and over, they sinned against him. Yet he says, I'm going to do these things because I want to recapture your heart. This word here for estranged is language of a relationship that's been, that is being ruined. And now there's distance. And God is saying, I'm doing this because I want the fellowship to be restored. I want your hearts. I want to recapture the hearts of the people. And that's how much God loves us. That even though we would sin against him, rebel against him, commit treason against him, which is always punishable by death, yet he still reaches out to us and says, I want you to turn to me. And that's what we have here in this passage. He doesn't need us, but yet he wants us to be in a relationship with us.

And then verse six, he says, therefore say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, repent and turn away from your idols and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

Even after all that they have done, even they're, they're being judged right now for years and years of idolatry. They're still practicing idolatry, even though they're being judged for it. And he's still saying, but I still am allowing you to repent, repent, turn your faces from your abominations, turn to me. Isn't it too late for repentance at that point? But over and over we have in, in scripture where God says, I'm compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Another metaphor we see throughout scripture is the idea of parent and child, that God is, is a loving father. And this is the way a loving parent would discipline their children. It's not to punish us and to, to make them pay for it. It's to restore, to help them to learn, to grow so that they can become what they were intended to be. A good parent is not just punishing, but discipline in order for the good of the child. And this is what God is doing for his people. Then we get to verses 10 and 11. It says, and they shall bear their punishment, the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike 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. He's doing all of this so that they would no longer go astray, so that they would no longer defile themselves with their transgressions, but that they may be his people and God be their God.

[15:20] This punishment is supposed to lead to a cleansing, to keep people from straying more and defiling themselves, but it's to bring them back. These idols that they're putting before their faces are tripping them up. They're stumbling blocks. They don't even realize how much they're harming themselves by turning from the Lord. And he's lovingly trying to turn them back. And we see here covenant language, where he says that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord. In all of this, God has not forgotten his covenant with his people. God's commitment to his covenant has caused him to act in such a way that would bring him glory so that you will know that I'm the Lord and will be from their good so that they can turn from their stumbling blocks, the things they've placed before them.

His commitment is the reason why he's doing all this. His commitment to his glory, his commitment to his people. God loves them so much that he would go to the greatest lengths to save his people.

And this is what we see throughout all of the history of redemption, ultimately seeing the highest beauty of this in Jesus Christ, where God has gone to the ultimate lengths to send Jesus to who had wholehearted devotion. There was no divided heart with Jesus, wholehearted devotion, completely fulfilling all righteousness, because we could not do that. And then he was the sacrifice for our sins because he lived the life that we should have lived and died the death that we deserve to die so that we could have that relationship with God. God loves us so much that he refuses to let his people go down this path of idolatry and destruction. So he's trying to wake them up and he's trying to wake us up. He wants us to avoid the self-destruction as well as we turn after other things. Now, we're just as prone today to idolatry as in the days of Daniel and the days of Ezekiel. The world around us and the culture around us wants us to worship their gods, just like in those days. The world is constantly wooing us with its messages.

Walmart, most of you probably heard of Walmart. I think it's still the leading retail company in the world. Their slogan is, save money, live better. What are they saying?

If you are able to save money, you will live better. And we're the ones to help you do that. We're the savior here. Live better by saving money. As if money is the answer to all of our problems.

[18:06] And we believe that. We dream about the days of maybe winning a lottery or having someone leave us some money in an inheritance. We dream of what we would do if we had this money or got this raise or was able to do this thing. Now, we might say, hey, look, idols, what are you talking about? We're not bowing down to wood and stone and metal and things like that. But you could say that we often bow down to paper, especially when it has an image of the king or the former queen on it. Money can grab our hearts and greed can grab our hearts in ways that we don't even realize it's happening. We struggle with idolatry thinking that money or stuff will make us happen. But even the people of Israel, if you look at the heart of it and say, why in the world? How in the world? Like they had prophets that would come to them and give them a word of the Lord. How could they turn from God in this way? And if you think about it, in an agrarian society, when everything depends on the crops, things aren't going exactly how you think they should, what starts to happen? You start to worry. Maybe God isn't going to come through for us by sending us rain this time. Maybe we turn to the Baals, the storm god of the Canaanites. Yeah, maybe, just maybe, we'll try it out. See if he'll come through for us. Or the Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess. Maybe, maybe we'll have a little bit more fertile land or be more fertile as a people if we turn to these gods.

They were tempted to do these things because of anxiety, because of worry, thinking that maybe God's not going to come through for us and we got to take matters into our own hands. Maybe they weren't trusting in God's protection as they hear threats of enemy armies. So what do they do?

They turn to the Egyptians. Come save us from the Assyrians. They turn to Assyria. Come save us from the Babylonians. They turn to other people, other nations, because they trusted in other things besides God. And idols, we mentioned, are not, often not bad things, just good things that we desire too much.

It's anything that we look to for security and stabilization and satisfaction and hope. In speaking on Ezekiel 14, David Palinson, who's an American theologian, says that the New Testament parallel to idolatry is lust or over-desiring something, desiring something too much. And we see that in our hearts all the time where we desire things more than we should. Even the most precious gifts of our spouse or our children. We desire things too much where we look to those things to bring us satisfaction instead of the Lord. We can desire money. We can desire success, education, relationships, leisure, travel, toys. Maybe we desire a certain appearance. Maybe it's others' approval. Maybe it's something that's just the clout it gets us when we're punctual or we're seen as a good leader.

Maybe it's diet and exercise. Things that we look to that I said, if I just looked like this or felt like this or was able to do this, then I would be happy. So some of those questions we need to be asking ourselves are, like what makes you feel like you're living rightly? Sometimes Kelly and I will talk about, we got this from a study that we did one time on idolatry, where we talk about health righteousness. Where that's someone that thinks because I eat right and go to the gym and all these things. I'm in a good spot. And by the way, you should do this too. If you should try it, try this diet. Try this thing that I do. You could even look like me or be like me if you did this.

[ 22 : 13 ] We would call that health righteousness. What is it that would make you feel like you are right? So for instance, an image righteousness. This person should never dress like that.

Aren't they paying attention to how they should dress or what they should wear or how they should carry themselves? We can find the silliest things to compare ourselves with other people and feel like we are living righteously. Those kind of things are the things that we're looking to us to make us feel like we're someone. To make us feel like we have meaning and purpose. And that is the heart of idolatry. What would ruin your life if you lost it? What gives you anxiety? What keeps you up at night? What do you feel anxiety for because you're either afraid you're going to lose it or you're trying to keep it? What is just too important to you? I mean, just even personally, preaching today, one of the temptations that a preacher always feels is, hey, what do they think about the sermon?

Did I do a good job today? Did I teach that passage rightly? And all of a sudden, instead of thinking about God's glory and giving you a picture of the one who created you and gave you life and is calling you into the most fulfilling, the only fulfilling relationship that there is, instead of hoping that you are drawing near to God through the preaching of His Word, I'm thinking about my performance.

Our hearts just do that, guys. Our hearts run to those things, and we constantly have to keep a check on our hearts. We constantly have to be going to the Lord. And I mentioned that idolatry can be loving the gift more than the giver. Tonight, one of our best friends, they're coming into town.

Susie, she was the maid of honor in our wedding. And I was surprising Kelly to go look for an engagement ring when we were back in uni. And so Susie, she was like scheming with me how to do this.

[ 24 : 22 ] And she was going to go to the jewelry store because she'd been doing the reconnaissance to figure out what kind of ring Kelly wanted because we're trying to keep it a surprise. And so we go to the jewelry store and very overwhelming, obviously. Well, I wind up buying this ring. And it's like this big moment.

I mean, you're like, I know she's going to say yes, but you know, this is like a big deal, right? And so what if after all that that we did to find the ring and the way we schemed, it was a lot of fun and all these things, she's going to be surprised. I give her the ring and she takes it and she says, this is beautiful. Look at this ring. And I'm over here and I'm like, is that a yes? And you're like, yeah, yeah, yeah, sure, sure, sure. But look at the ring. Look at this, my precious. Like look at the ring.

But that's what we do with God, where we love the gift more than the giver. We fall in love with the gifts and long for more gifts instead of falling in love with the one who gives us all things.

Think about how we see idolatry in Daniel. With Nebuchadnezzar, it's all about him. It's all power plays where he's saying, worship me, be devoted to me, acknowledge me as the savior, acknowledge that I'm the one you can trust. I'm the one that can deliver you as the one who will lead you into prosperity. And we look to other things to fulfill that role that only God can fill. So how do we deal with idols in the heart? Well, the first thing I would say is we've got to learn to deal with idols of the heart at the root. At the root. Sin is very subtle. And often we just focus on that outward sin instead of going down deeper and say, why was it that I was desiring that thing? Sin goes so deep that we don't even know why we just told a lie or why I'm all of a sudden not being compassionate or why I'm being greedy. We've got to get to the root of it. So when my boys were like eight or nine, we were out in the garden pulling weeds and you could see the personality of each boy kind of coming out. My middle son Hudson would just go and he'd just tear the top off of what you saw, you know? Oh, it's all good. Look, it's clean, dad. Whereas my older son would love to get his hands dirty. So he'd get in and he'd pull everything out by his roots and show how strong he was by pulling a root out and all these different things. But the first thing I realized during that time is we only really decided to pull the weeds when it got so bad that it was starting to be embarrassing.

People were starting to notice kind of thing. But that's what we kind of do with sin, isn't it? Take care of the outward things so that people aren't going to notice, so that something might not embarrass me. And then just like my middle son, we often just chop it off at the top and don't really dig down and get to the root of it. And guess what happens?

[27:27] It springs right back up. Huh. I'm shocked that this is, I'm struggling with this again today. When we're not doing the hard work. Because it is hard work and it's messy.

To deal with what's visible or what other people might see, what might embarrass us, that's a lot more urgent, you know? But are we taking care of the problem by going to the Lord and really digging down to find what is the sin underneath the sin? Why is it that having successful or well-behaved children is so important to me? Why is it when we get so defensive when someone critiques us?

Why is it that I get so upset when someone breaks the cue? What is going into our hearts? What is it that has a hold on our hearts? So one, we must learn to deal with the idols of our hearts at a root level. And number two, as I would just say, idols cannot be removed, only replaced. I heard an illustration one time that stuck with me. I think it was the pastor, John Piper, that I first heard say this. But he asked the question, how do you get air out of a glass? He said, if you ask a kid, how do you get air out of a glass? It's like, you might cover it up and stick a straw in and try to suck it out. Or maybe you get a vacuum and a Hoover and, you know, try to suck the air out. But he said, how do you get air out of a glass? You fill it with water. And that's the way it is in dealing with sin. You can't just pull things out. Because our hearts, as John Calvin said, are idol factories. They have to be replaced.

Be replaced by the Lord Jesus Christ. Only he can fulfill us. We must learn to fight idolatry through repentance and worship. Worship by being reminded of who God is, what he has done for us, and how only by coming to him through Jesus Christ will we find fulfillment in life. Blaise Pascal, I was actually kind of challenged. There's a quote I've been using from Blaise Pascal for years that says, there's a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that can not be filled by any created thing, but can only be filled by God through Jesus Christ. That actually wasn't what he said, but this is what he said.

This infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object. In other words, by God himself. Only by repenting and worshiping God through Jesus Christ can we find the security, the satisfaction, the love, the hope, the fulfillment that he wants us to have.

[30:20] Let's pray. God, we do thank you that you are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You are so patient with us when it comes to the way we look to other things.

We become convinced in our minds that stuff, having possessions or money or relationships or success at work or whatever it might be. Convinced that those are the things that are going to fill our hearts longing. But that longing can only be filled by you. Help us to repent of our idols. Help us to do that hard, messy work of getting down to the root. What is it that's grasping our heart? Why would I behave this way or think this thing or feel this anxiety? Help us to get to the root of the matter and to repent, to turn to you and find forgiveness, cleansing, and that closeness of relationship where the psalmist says the nearness of God is our good. And help us to understand and believe that with all of our hearts. That drawing near to you is the only thing that will satisfy us. Help us to do that. And as we finish our time of worship singing and taking the Lord's Supper, Lord, help us to fix our eyes on the one who made us, gave us life, and who alone can fulfill us. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.