

## Idols Never Satisfy

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Rich Nathan

February 21-22, 2015

Living With Limits Series

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11

Today I want to talk about the subject of idolatry. We almost never use the term “idol” anymore except in regards to entertainment – like American Idol, or “teen Idol.” For most folks living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the word “idol” conjures up images of primitive people bowing down to some statue made of wood or stone. It is interesting that the most famous and influential moral code in the world begins with God prohibiting the practice of idolatry. Here is the first of the Ten Commandments:

Exodus 20:3 (NIV)

3 “You shall have no other gods before me.

What does it mean to have another god? How might we identify in our own life rival gods to the Lord God?

Discovering our idols

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer’s Presbyterian Church in New York, wrote a powerful book a few years ago titled Counterfeit Gods.

Cover Photo of Counterfeit Gods by Tim Keller

One of the points that Tim Keller made is that an idol is any good thing that we turn into an ultimate thing.

What good thing have you made into an ultimate thing?

Every culture practices idolatry because every culture takes something that is good and makes it ultimate, something that is finite and makes it of infinite value. In traditional cultures the family, the clan; the tribe was exalted to a place of infinite importance. That’s why in some traditional cultures, if your sister or brother is dishonored (e.g., your sister is kissed by a neighbor boy), the appropriate response is to kill the person who dishonored her.

In modern society at various times race has become an absolute as in Nazi Germany, or South Africa, or one’s ethnicity as in Serbia, or our nation or country as at various times

here in the United States. We have community idols. We have individual idols – our work, our kids, or our money. We absolutize various values like freedom and choice. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the West, the individual’s right to determine our own destiny trumps every other thing. We absolutize individual freedom.

How do we discover our idols? What good thing have you made into an ultimate thing? And second,

What is it that if you lost it, would devastate you?

Tim Keller makes the point in his book that it is normal to grieve when we lose something that is important to us. So it is normal to grieve when you are fired from your job. It is normal to grieve when you break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, who you love. It is normal to grieve when you have a broken engagement or a broken marriage, when you go through a divorce. It is certainly normal to grieve when a loved one dies.

But if you say that because of this loss, my life is over. Because I lost my boyfriend or girlfriend, I now have nothing and I want to jump off the building, then your girlfriend or boyfriend has become an idol. Underneath our devastated feelings, our feelings of rage or despair, the thing that we can’t get past, that we keep talking about over and over regarding our sense of loss – so often the thing we can’t get past is the loss of one of our idols. And sometimes the idol that we’ve lost is not a person, like a spouse or a child, or a thing like our jobs. Sometimes the idol is the way that we want others to perceive us. Sometimes the idol in our lives is our own sense of identity.

For example, have you ever felt that because of something you did or failed to do, you just can’t forgive yourself? Maybe you had an affair, or you had an abortion, or you did something that violated your moral code. And even though you’ve confessed it to God over and over again, you can’t let yourself off the hook. If that’s the case, friend, it may be that what is really devastating you is the loss of one of your idols – the idol of thinking of yourself as a good and moral person. Your identity – I’m a good person. I am a moral person. I would never do something like that. That’s what you bowed down to. That’s what was of ultimate value in your life. When that image was shattered, you were devastated.

For some of us our idol is always being known as a nice person, being liked. We can’t handle it when someone doesn’t like us. Someone doesn’t disappoint us, it devastates us. Why - because deep down we worship this self-image of being nice, or being helpful, or being a great mom or a great dad. Maybe being respected is your idol. How do you react when your reputation is attacked? Are you hurt or are your destroyed?

How do we discover our idols? Look at your most uncontrollable emotions when we just fly into a rage, or when we sink into absolute despair. Just like a fisherman knows

that when the water is stirred up, there are probably fish below the surface, so when our emotions are stirred up, we know we probably can look there and spot one of our idols. Am I raging or in despair because one of my idols is being threatened? Am I outraged because I'm trying at all cost to defend a secret idol – maybe an addiction to alcohol, or pills or porn and my idol is threatened. Am I down on myself because I consider something to be necessary for my existence, when it isn't necessary for my existence? Investigate your rage or despair; fish there and you might snag an idol.

How do we discover our idols? What good thing have we made into an ultimate thing? What is it that if you lost it would devastate you? And third,

What commandments do you regularly break?

Tim Keller notes that the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, argued that we never break any of the other Ten Commandments without breaking the first – the commandment against having rival gods. For example, suppose you know that if you were honest on your resume, that you would have less of a shot of getting a particular job than if you lied. In that situation, you lie, you cover-up because you count success more important than obeying God and bowing down to God. Beneath the sin of lying is a deeper sin of idolatry. This job is more important to me than my relationship with God. What commandment do you regularly break? Almost always we break a commandment to protect an idol.

The season of the year that we are in on the church calendar is called Lent. Lent is the 40-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Lent is a time when Christians around the world engage in self-reflection and repentance – the discovery of your idols and the cleansing of hearts of idolatry. During this season of Lent we are exploring the Book of Ecclesiastes in a series that I've titled "Living With Limits." Life in this world has limits. The problem with us as we discovered last week is hubris. We have an exaggerated view of our own capacities. We try to pretend that we have no limits that we can know everything that we can accomplish everything that we can live forever. Today, the writer of Ecclesiastes challenges us to reflect on the meaningless of our idols. I've called today's talk, "Idols Never Satisfy." Let's pray.

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:11 (NIV)

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and

knowledge.” 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;  
the more knowledge, the more grief.

2 I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. 2 “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;  
I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labor,  
and this was the reward for all my toil.

11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun.

The writer of Ecclesiastes puts himself in the guise of the ancient King Solomon as he writes in chapters 1 and 2. At the end of chapter 1, the writer is talking about what I am labeling,

#### The idol of science

In the ancient world, and up until modern times, we would have called it the idol of philosophy. But philosophy has been displaced as queen of academic disciplines by the idol of science. We believe today that the only legitimate argument in the public square is one that has scientific evidence behind it. Most people believe that science, given enough time, will be able to answer all questions and solve all problems. Science has no limits. Modern culture has stopped looking to the wisdom of ancient peoples or to any revelation from any religious book except for occasional spiritual comfort when someone dies.

But the way the writer of Ecclesiastes describes philosophy, we could apply is description to modern science today. So in v. 13 we read this:

Ecclesiastes 1:13 (NIV)

13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!

The writer describes his pursuit of truth as being incredibly extensive. It covers everything done under heaven. He searched out everything, covered every base. There is no possibility that there are any facts out there that he hasn't looked at. And he devoted himself to this task. He studied diligently. This is a person who has spent years of intensive study. He not only has an undergraduate degree and a Masters, and a Ph.D., but he has done post-doctoral work. He has spent his life studying. And yet, at the end of the day, he recognizes the limits of human study.

Ecclesiastes 1:14 (NIV)

14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

No matter how much I study, I discover even more things beyond my grasp. Truth is elusive.

The limits of science

These limits are underlined in v. 16:

Ecclesiastes 1:16 (NIV)

16 I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge."

In other words, if the most brilliant person whoever lived can't figure out certain things without revelation from God, if the most intensive human investigation by the brightest person can't answer certain questions, then the natural conclusion is what hope do the rest of us have? If the best and the brightest can't figure out certain things via science and philosophy, then maybe certain things are unanswerable by that method.

You know, the only thing that is more ridiculous than listening to a theologian weigh in with their opinion about science, is listening to a scientist offering their 2-cents about theology. At least the theologian, or the pastor, is likely to have taken some basic science classes in high school and maybe a few science classes involving lab work in college. Maybe the pastor or theologian actually has read a good book or two about science. Whereas, scientists today are not likely to have taken even one theology class in their whole life, or read one intelligent book written by a sophisticated theologian.

So when I hear scientists such as Richard Dawkins on NPR speaking authoritatively about the non-existence of God, or about what is and isn't moral in terms that would be laughed out of any religion 101 or philosophy 101 class, I think what hubris, what arrogance. Do you think that just because you have a degree in evolutionary biology that you have anything worthwhile to say about free will, life after death, or our human need for forgiveness. Do you also in your spare time speak authoritatively to moms about raising toddlers. Does your degree in evolutionary biology really qualify you to call plays for the Buckeyes? Do you regularly call Urban Meyer with suggestions? The reality is that if you have studied one thing in a modern university, you are less and less likely today to know almost anything about any other discipline.

With the explosion of knowledge, most training today goes deeper and deeper into ever more narrow areas. Rare is the person whose thought and read widely across a range of disciplines today. So many academics fall prey to the trap that the Apostle Paul described in his first letter to the Corinthians when he said:

Knowledge puffs up

I've listened to scientists weigh in about God or about morality. We sometimes are like a balloon. We have an over-inflated view of ourselves. We think we can, because we can think well about one area, grab hold of truth in a comprehensive way.

Science can do amazing things – heal diseases, figure out better ways to communicate, and to travel and to feed the world. But there are things that science does not do and cannot do, that scientific training will not prepare you to do. Science has limits. Science can't make moral judgments. Listening to a scientist or a doctor who has simply been medically trained, weigh in on whether a human being ought to have the right to take their own life, whether euthanasia is moral or not is beyond the purview of science. A doctor simply relying on science can no more tell us whether abortion is moral or immoral than any random person sitting at a corner bar, or waiting for a bus can tell us.

The discipline of science can't tell us what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. The discipline of science can't make moral judgments. This discipline of science can't make aesthetic judgments – judgments about what's beautiful. Science can't tell us whether country music is better than hip-hop, or whether Beethoven was a better composer than Mozart, or whether Renoir was a better painter than Picasso, or whether Angelina Jolie is prettier than Halle Berry. Aesthetic judgments – judgment about beauty - are beyond the purview of science.

And science can't even tell us how to use science. Scientists may care deeply about how their study can be used, but science itself won't tell us the correct use of splitting the atom – whether to create energy or a bomb, or the correct use of genetic research – whether to heal a disease, or to invent some deadly new bacteria to use in germ warfare.

Science has limits, as does every other field of study under the sun. That's what the author of Ecclesiastes says in vv. 13-14:

Ecclesiastes 1:13–14 (NIV)

13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Remember the perspective of the writer of Ecclesiastes is someone looking at life under the sun, looking at life the way an atheist would, or an agnostic – someone who doesn't know if there is a God or not, or a deist – someone who believes in God, but doesn't think God speaks or answers prayer. Seeking truth under the sun the way an atheist would or agnostic or deist is futile.

We need someone above the heavens, someone above the sun to answer the really big moral questions – to answer questions of life's meaning and purpose. We need revelation that goes beyond our own capacity to discover. The Book of Ecclesiastes is pointing ahead to our need for Christ.

The need for Christ

Let's look at v. 15:

Ecclesiastes 1:15 (NIV)

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.

The great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, once said:

*Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.*

The writer of Ecclesiastes said what is crooked cannot be straightened. My dad was a roofer and a home builder. I remember going with him when I was a little boy to the lumber yard where he selected lumber. He would pull out one of the boards and look down the board to make sure it was straight. You can't make a straight house out of boards that are crooked.

People try to build families from the crooked timber of a sinful man and a sinful woman. We combine the neediness of a man for approval and recognition with the neediness of a woman for love and respect. We wonder why the roofs on so many marriages cave in. We need a straight, strong post holding up the centers of our families. We need Christ,

who alone, is sinless, who demonstrates to us how to love and then by his Spirit gives us a capacity to love that goes way beyond our national capacity to love.

Out of the crookedness of humanity, no straight thing was ever made. So many churches have the roofs fall in because we try to combine my crookedness with your crookedness. The only way to build a church is around the strong, straight post of Christ.

The writer of Ecclesiastes goes on and says what is lacking cannot be counted.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.

He is talking about our human limits. Have you ever tried to put something into the life of another person that they simply don't have to fill in a crack that is at the foundation? Just try to re-parent an adult, who had no parents, or terrible parents. Just try to re-parent a young man, or young woman, who had no father. The writer of Ecclesiastes says we who live under the sun can't put in what is missing. The only hope is that this person with the God-shaped hole in their hearts would encounter someone above the sun. That the young man or young woman would encounter the Father's love for them and allow the Father to bless and affirm them as the Father's beloved son or daughter.

The writer goes on to speak about:

The idol of success

Ecclesiastes 2:4–9 (NIV)

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

The writer, again taking the guise of Solomon, is speaking about a person who believes that through their work, through their careers, through their projects, they are going to find meaning and purpose in life. This is a person who is driven to greater and greater heights of success in business. They want to leave a mark on the world. They find their identity by becoming a famous actor, by designing a great building, by having their own clothing line, by striking some blow for justice. They are driven to succeed.

The New York Times recently did a long magazine piece about Tom Brady, the Super Bowl winning QB of the New England Patriots, a man who is married to one of the most beautiful women in the world, a super-model. She is gorgeous; he is great looking; he could be a model.

Photo of Tom Brady and his wife

The article was titled “Tom Brady Cannot Stop.” Do you know what Tom Brady does when he is on vacation with his family in the Bahamas? Every morning he goes through this intense exercise regime. This is on vacation. He includes resistance drills, exercise with rubber bands, stretches to foster muscular flexibility. Then after his vacation workouts, he joins his family for a late breakfast that for him consists of a protein shake that’s high in electrolytes and includes greens like kale and collards. His trainer was asked if Tom Brady is ever allowed to eat a cheeseburger. The trainer said, “We have treats.” What? “Usually raw desserts, raw macaroons, and ice cream made out of avocados.”

Tom Brady said he would like to play QB forever. He said, “I have no other interests. I am not a musician. I am not an artist. What I do is play football.” Tom’s dad, Tom Brady, Sr., said he believes that his son’s football career will end in tears because Tom, Jr. doesn’t see that no one plays forever. At some point his abilities will decline as he ages.

We have made an idol of success. If you are 20 or 30 something, maybe you’ve thought about starting your own business. Lots of 20 and 30 somethings are saying, “I’m going to leave my job doing whatever it is working for whatever company I’m working for and start my own business. I’m going to get myself a food truck, or print t-shirts, or I’m going to spend my time creating some app. Surely, starting up my own business could be some idol that I need to reflect on during this season of Lent.”

If you are a 20 or 30-something, or even older, and you say, “I’m going to strike out on my own and start my own business, what question should I ask myself?” I would suggest these:

1. Is this business congruent with the gifts and talents God gave me?

Are you a cook? Are you a designer? Is this particular passion in your wheelhouse? These are the gifts you have.

2. If I start this business will I serve people better than I’m currently serving them?

The goal of life is to serve people better. And third,

3. Will this business provide for my needs and the needs of those I support, or will I be dependent on others to meet my financial needs?

Finally,

4. Is this business a way for me to find meaning in life, or establish my identity?

See, this is the idolatry question: If what I'm really looking for is to have the identity of being a hip entrepreneur, if what you're looking for in your career is to find your identity, then Ecclesiastes speaks to that and says no career, no job, no project will give you ultimate fulfillment and meaning. Because success is limited.

The limits of success

How do you define success? The writer of Ecclesiastes defines success as having more than someone else. Look at v. 7:

Ecclesiastes 2:7 (NIV)

7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

In v. 9 he talks about being greater than anyone else.

Ecclesiastes 2:9 (NIV)

9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

If we are trying to find meaning in life via success, it is always going to be fruitless because we can never stay ahead of everyone.

Never ahead

If you are in academics, there is always going to be someone who is smarter than you, who is publishing more than you, who got more grants than you got. If you are in business, there is always going to be someone who comes along who has better connections than you do, who is luckier than you are, who develops something newer, more popular, and more innovative. In this fickle society, anything that is hot today will surely be out of style tomorrow. If you are a model, there is always going to be someone who is prettier than you, or has the look that some designer wants.

There are limits to success. You can never stay ahead of everyone. And the reason pursuing success is like chasing the wind – it's an absurd pursuit because we never have enough success.

### Never enough

You know, it doesn't matter how much we get, we always want just a little bit more. I remember when Marlene and I got our first apartment when we were just married, all the furniture in the apartment was hand-me-downs. It stayed with the apartment. The only thing we had of our own was we got a mattress for our wedding as a gift and we bought a little cabinet for \$10 to put our dishes in. Apart from that everything else came with the apartment.

I remember sitting on this old couch one day looking at this bookcase that I built out of painted boards and cinder blocks. I had my books in this bookcase. I looked around the apartment at my bed, my table and chairs, and a couple of the places in the living room to sit. I had my bookcase and my books and I looked over all my books and thought, "This is great. I'm so content. Who would want anything more than this?" The answer was, "Me!" As I began making more money, my wanters kept floating up and up and up.

Trying to find fulfillment and success is a never ending project. And success

### Never satisfies

The article in the New York Times on Tom Brady titled "Tom Brady Cannot Stop" is really sad. After Tom Brady won his third Super Bowl, he was interviewed on 60 Minutes by Steve Kroft. And Brady said,

*Maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey, man, this is what it is. You've made it. You've reached your goal." Me? I think God, it's got to be more than this.*

He's married to a super-model. The two of them are fabulously wealthy. They have an enormous house outside of Boston. They have a gorgeous apartment in New York. He is the most successful QB of this generation. And he says:

*There's got to be more than this.*

Life under the sun, no matter how successful, never satisfies. The limits of the idol of success points to our need for Christ.

### The need for Christ

Under the sun there is no satisfaction. But above the sun, above the heavens we find Christ. You know what Christ says to you and me? Christ says: You don't have to do some great thing.

### No need to do some great thing

You don't have to do some great thing in order for your life to have meaning. You don't have to build a great business, or build an enormous house, or have more money than anyone. You don't have to have a great ministry. You don't have to do some great thing in science, in academics, in law, or in whatever your job is. You don't have to be #1 in your profession. You don't have to do some great thing in order for your life to have meaning. Jesus says to you and me, "I've already done the great thing!" Christianity is not God coming to us and saying, "You've got to accomplish more. You've not done enough. Do something great. Just work a little harder."

The reason Christianity is such good news is that God says to us, "My Son, Jesus, has already done the great thing." God says, "My Son, Jesus, lived a perfect life before me. And then he did the greatest thing of all by dying in your place and paying for your sin on the cross." The only thing you need to do to find meaning in life is to trust him and his great work on your behalf.

There is no need to do some great thing. And there is:

No need to establish our own identity

Your work will never give you an identity that ultimately satisfies. No achievement, no sale that you make, no article that you write, no customer that you gain, no person that you help, no success will give you an ultimately fulfilling sense of identity. The identity that all of us need, that fills us down to the deepest recesses of our souls is to hear God say to us, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you so much that I sent my Son, Jesus Christ, to die in your place and to secure you for myself." To know yourself as a beloved son or daughter of God and to live out of that identity, that's the ultimate place of freedom from all the idols that enslave. Let's pray.

## Idols Never Satisfy

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Rich Nathan

February 21-22, 2015

Living With Limits Series

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11

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