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Teenage Idolatry: The Dangerous Exchange

By Lisa Anderson

Have you ever wondered why you commit sins against our gracious heavenly Father? Have you heard about idolatry, but you're not really sure what it is; or perhaps you know what it is, but you don't really get how it actually affects your own daily life? I mean, how could the Exodus story of a golden cow in the desert really be helpful to me here and now? I am so glad you want to know the answers to these questions. God promises that getting a handle on what idolatry is personally for you, and your turning away from idolatry and turning to Him, will bring you great peace, hope, and joy that you can't get any other way.

Let's jump right in. I am going to give an example of my own idolatry from when I was a teenager. I will use Scripture to interpret my heart (desires, attitudes, motives). You might say it this way – I am going to use Scripture as the lens I look through to understand God, myself, and my circumstances. Some refer to this as reinterpreting things biblically. OK, let's say I wanted attention and affection from a guy at my high school. We will call him Matt. Some days he would be nice to me and pay attention to me. But some days he would ignore me. When that happened, I would get all upset and discouraged. And sometimes then I got angry at him. Why? Why am I angry at this guy? Why am I discouraged? God tells me why. Jeremiah 2:11-13 explains to me that because I am not purposefully, intentionally recalling who God is, what He has done and is doing, and His great and precious promises to me; because I am forgetting Who my true source of affection really is, I have gone to another source to get this desire met.

Let's look at this passage and then flesh it out in other daily challenges.

Jeremiah 2 starts out with God's recounting how His people, Israel, were devoted to God as a bride is to her groom, following Him into and through the desert. He brought them into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. As well, God brought disaster upon all who harmed them. But what is so sad is that although God had made the nation Israel His own and cared for her like a father caring for his young children or a bridegroom caring for his bride, the Israelites began to look elsewhere and trust in other people or things for their

security, approval, love, happiness, provision, care, hope, satisfaction, comfort, refuge, affection, etc. Let's see how God explains this:

Jeremiah 2:11-13

"Has a nation changed gods
When they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory
For that which does not profit. (idol)
"Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate," declares the LORD.

"For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water."

¹ Parenthetical added

Not One, but Two

Do you notice He said "two evils?" Evil #1 is that they have forsaken the Lord. What does that mean? It means they have abandoned the Lord. It means that although God had faithfully and always done what was in their best interest for all the years of their lives so they could know Him and receive His great spiritual blessings as a result of knowing Him ("fountain of living waters"), they chose not to turn to Him but chose to turn away from Him. Rather than choosing to bring to mind God's great history with them, His love for them, His promises to them, they chose to turn away from Him.

What was evil #2? They went elsewhere – described as "broken cisterns that hold no water." In those days, a hewn cistern was a hole dug in the ground to collect rain water that would drop down into it. The thinking was that the worst of the impurities would fall to the bottom before people drank of it. With this, in times of drought, there would at least be some kind of water to drink, even if it was stale, scummy water. But then God even says it is a broken cistern! That yucky water will drip out – it will never be enough to satisfy. God is comparing His life-giving, pure, unstoppable water, "spring of living water," to the water that has flowed over the ground (over heaven only knows what all before it fell in) and was collected in a broken cistern.

OK, so let's get back to my example of idolatry in my own life. Who loves me perfectly and eternally? God. How do I know that? Well, for one thing, it was displayed perfectly in Jesus' horrific suffering and death to save me from the just penalty of my sins, eternal Hell.

I am loved by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit perfectly, and it is not conditional on what

I do or don't do.

He knows the number of hairs on my head, knows the number of tears I have shed, only allows what is best for my eternal soul, and promises to provide for my every need as long as I am to be here on Earth. But when Matt ignored me, did I choose to recall God's great love shown at the cross and that God is the lover of my soul? Or, did I forsake God and choose to try to make Matt the one who is to be the source of affection for me? Ah, I did the latter. This is the sin of idolatry. I went to something or someone to be the giver, source, of what God already is for me. I committed spiritual adultery against my perfect Groom. I had forsaken God, and I made an exchange of the one true God for my hewn-out cistern named Matt. When I did not get it, I dug deeper into the cistern by responding with self-focus and despair rather than running to God in prayer and remembering who God is and His great and precious promises to me. God explains that it is a broken cistern, and therefore it can never provide enough. I will have a continual lust for more if I make anything or anyone my source other than God.

You see, I had a desire for attention and affection, but rather than choosing to bring to the forefront of my mind who God says He is and what He says He is doing, I went to Matt. Had I gone to God for affection (praying, recalling truths about God, singing praise songs, etc.) rather than thinking I "needed" it from another source (hence exchanging God, the Creator, for something created), then I would have been so overwhelmed with the love of God. Instead of trying to be a "getter" of kindness and affection from Matt, instead I would have sought to find ways to be a "giver" of God's amazing kindness to people around me. God's goodness would be overflowing off of me and onto others. I should have been a "getter" from God and a "giver" to others. This is a good principle to memorize – "I should be a getter from God and a giver to others."

God created us and gave us the "users' manual," His Bible, to give us understanding about Him, our circumstances, and ourselves. And in this passage, He is telling me what happened when I got discouraged (fainthearted) and then angry at Matt. He tells me I left God as the source of love and affection and made a horrible and dangerous exchange. I went to Matt (cistern) to get it. And God calls that "idolatry," which is spiritual adultery against God.

Instruments, Not Sources

We begin to understand here that in these moments of temptation when we may want to look to something or someone as the source of something we want, we are to purposefully remember and believe Truth, that God – who is our strength, refuge, comforter, provider, joy, hope, identity, security, protector, etc. – is the perfect source. We are not to go to people or things rather than God as the source of them. Now does God use people and things as His instruments to deliver these blessings at times? Yes! At times of His perfect and gracious choosing, He does. But as our hearts are prone to wander, we all frequently begin to see these instruments as the source, rather than remembering that God is the source, and I have no "right" to get these blessing from these instruments. Does God command people to do certain things that are blessings to me? Yes, but that does not mean they are the source of

it, nor does it mean God will choose that person or thing at any time in the future. Furthermore, and wonderfully, if I am making God the source, rather than making the mere instrument the source, I will be well content even if this instrument "dries up"! Why? Because God is my sufficiency in every area of my life.

What are some other examples of idolatrous lusts? How about the approval of friends? First of all, why are you approved by God? Because of Jesus' death for your sins, God approves of you 100%. Jesus became sin, and you get His righteousness when you place faith in God the Father as your Lord (authority), in His perfect Son's death to pay the death penalty for your own sins, and in Jesus' resurrection three days later. That is why you are approved by God and for no other reason. Christ's torture and death required horrific suffering! Amazingly, all of that suffering was so that you could be approved by God. And yet, AND YET, you and I go to mere man for approval (our cisterns). We have exchanged our God for someone or something else. What are some examples of this?

- A young woman fears going to school when she has a pimple on her face. She wants approval from her peers.
- A man does not bring up the clear sin of his wife because he wants her approval, her praise.
- A parent does not give consequences for the child's disobedience because he wants his child's approval.

Each of these examples shows that there was a desire for approval, but the person went to the wrong place – instead of choosing to intentionally remember what God promises about Himself and living according to that, each of them has gone elsewhere to get the desire for approval met. Idolatry, spiritual adultery. This is sin starting in your hearts – trusting something or someone other than God. Then this heart sin, if not repented of quickly, results in sins of omission (not doing what God commanded) and/or commission (doing what we are commanded not to do). The young woman lies to stay home from school. The husband fails to lead his wife spiritually. The parent fails to discipline his/her child.

How about comfort and refuge? Today, you may hear comfort referred to as "ease of life." Peace would likely fall in this category. Who says He is our "refuge"? Who says He is our "peace"? Who is identified as the Comforter? Yes, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we so frequently go looking elsewhere to "get" that peace. One of the idolatrous desires I so frequently see in my own life is this one. I want comfort and peace but from the wrong sources – my teachers, friends, parents and/or my circumstances (no hard homework assignment, no chores, no misunderstandings, no disagreements, no hard or painful conversations, being included by friends rather than being left out, etc.). And I get discouraged, fainthearted, angry, and/or anxious when these people or circumstances don't give me what I want – comfort and peace. But God tells me they are all broken cisterns! And worst of all, He explains to me in the Jeremiah 2 passage that my first big problem is my sin of forsaking Him. If I had not done that first, then I would not have gone elsewhere to get those desires met.

Love God More and More

Now is it wrong when I do get a sense of comfort and peace when things are going smoothly with no potholes in the road of my life? God does not say that it is wrong to experience peace from that. But the problem comes when I start seeing those things, people, and/or circumstances as the SOURCE of my comfort, peace, approval, etc. And how can I know I have done that? My emotions are the warning light on the dashboard of my mind that there is a problem under my hood. You see, why would we EVER be anxious if we were consistently and prayerfully bringing to our own attention that God is the source of our security, comfort, provision, approval, affection, etc.? You are right, I would never be anxious! So what is my problem? Forsaking God. How do I gain victory over that sin? It is quite simple and not complicated, though I will have to say "no" to the flesh at times. God has made it quite doable as we remember His strength in us. What is this answer?

Read His love letter to us (the Bible) daily, prayerfully, hungrily, asking Him to reveal His character qualities to us through His Word made understandable by the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. The Bible explains to us that the Holy Spirit changes us through a sincere study of His Word. We will fall more and more in love with God - the wonderful Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The more we believers learn of His love, mercy, grace, wisdom, power, goodness, faithfulness, care, provision, etc., we cannot help but love Him more and more and therefore trust Him more and more. Therefore, we put our hope in Him as our source rather than the cisterns of the created world. We look to Him as the source. We trust Him as our source. Then we are content no matter what our circumstances are.

Then, because we trust Him more and more, we are more willing to obey Him, and we do obey more and more no matter the cost, as we believe what He says is true about Himself.

May I give you an analogy of what happens when we are not hungrily, prayerfully reading God's love letter consistently? I think this helps us understand the problem and solution. A young man and woman are engaged to be married. The man bravely signs on to serve his country in the military and gets called up to serve halfway across the world in an area of conflict. Although he cannot call his fiancée, he emails her every day telling of his love and devotion to her. At first, she reads his emails every day, but life gets busy, and she knows they will be there to read when she gets around to it. After all, the emails aren't going anywhere. So they go unread for a day, then later a few days, then sometimes a week. But there is this guy at her work who talks to her every day. She can sense his affection for her. He is kind to her, talks to her frequently, and even starts bringing her little gifts to work. The unread emails at home no longer hold the allure they once did. This guy at work – she can see him, hear him, touch his gifts to her. She begins to forget more and more of the good things about her fiancé out fighting for her country. You see, she went to what she could see, spent time contemplating him, and began to forget what was true about her fiancé's affections.

Now back to you and me. This is what happens to us when we are not reading God's love letter to us. Our hearts are prone to wander. We tend to forget. We want to have something we can see, touch, hear, smell, the created things, rather than regularly and intentionally putting at the forefront of our minds what God has told us about Himself, the

Creator. We make the great and horrible exchange; we commit the sin of idolatry, spiritual adultery against our perfect groom, Christ.

Chosen Enslavement

So, although the absolutely worst part of idolatry is that we have forsaken the Father who sent His Son, who willingly came and died for us, another very sad result of our idolatry is that we become enslaved (Psalm 106:36). And interestingly, enslaved to the very created person or thing to which we are going, wanting them/it to be the source! What does that enslavement look like? I went to Matt to be the source of kindness and affection. When he was affectionate, my day was good, I felt good. When Matt did not show the affection I had enjoyed, it is a BAD day for me. I felt bad during the day. I then would start seeking to manipulate circumstances to get that affection from him for ME by being flirtatious and wearing revealing clothes. I was enslaved. If I were going to God, remembering His great and perfect kindness and affection for me, my emotions would not be handcuffed to Matt's responses (or lack thereof) to me. NO! I'd be FREE and just be looking for ways to GIVE attention to others, not living my life trying to GET it.

If I make my youthful looks my source of happiness or satisfaction and my hair starts turning grey (which it has), and my wrinkles become more numerous and obvious (which they are), and gravity starts having its result (which it has), then I start having bad days, days I feel bad. I begin spending more and more money, extravagant-for-our-means amount of money, to try to get youthful beauty back. My happiness is enslaved to youthful beauty. If the mirror shows me what I want, it is a happy, good day. If I just can't hide my age that day, it is a SAD day. I am enslaved.

A girl has set her hope of happiness in making the volleyball team. She decides to use church time to practice, and gives up her church small group for even more time and practice. She stops doing her quiet time because her focus is on something else—volleyball! She spends so much time thinking about what it would be like to be on the team, and has awful thoughts of how she can't be happy if she doesn't make the team. She then does not make the team and begins to plan her suicide. The volleyball team was her source of happiness. Now that she does not have it, she thinks she just can't go on living. Idolatry is enslaving. Are you looking in all the wrong places for what God already is for you? Have you made sports, peers, money, etc. your source of happiness, affection, comfort, peace, approval, friends, relationships, security, etc., rather than God? What is your broken cistern?

Grace, Mercy, and Fruit

The incredible and, apart from faith, too-good-to-be-true Truth is that Jesus died to provide forgiveness for the sin of idolatry for those who believe in Him. As well, God's Spirit lives inside every believer, giving us the desire to confess (agree with God about it) and be forgiven and cleansed by our Father (1 John 1:9). So when our emotions of anxiety, hopelessness, discouragement, sinful anger, frustration, sinful fear, worry, etc., reveal we have gone elsewhere for what God already is for us, let us run to the throne of God for mercy and grace.

What a precious and free gift God gives us to be forgiven! We need to confess to God two sins:

1) I have forsaken You, the spring of living water, and

2) I have gone to created things and/or people to be the source to fulfill my desire for affection.

And what else is needed beyond my confession? I need to bear the fruits of repentance. That means I need to live out the truth that I agree with God about my idolatry, and I am going to do what is the opposite of that sin. When I look to Matt for affection, and I get fainthearted when he ignores me, does that reveal that I have forgotten – and therefore abandoned, forsaken – the true Lover of my soul and gone to a mere man to be my source of affection? Yes. Then the fruit of my repentance would be to ask for and depend on the help of the Holy Spirit, turn to God, and prayerfully, purposefully, intentionally call to mind what God has taught me about Himself. Was I idolatrous in the area of affection? I can look up verses on God's love for me in a concordance or Bible website like Biblegateway.com. I can work on hiding some of those verses in my heart by memorizing them and/or placing them where I can review them often. I can learn and sing a praise song that reminds me of these truths about God.

Was it approval for which I forsook God? Then I will remind myself of the cross and the costly 100% and unconditional approval Christ has already bought for me and which cannot be taken away from me. I can ask a mature believer to ask me good accountability questions frequently about how I am doing with purposefully remembering God's approval of me at the cross.

Then what is the fruit of repentance for idolatrous desires for security? I will memorize Psalm 46:1 so at the moment of temptation, when my heart goes to "Oh no! My parents are fighting again?" then I will replace that with "No, my parents are not my refuge. God is my refuge. He promises to provide me with what is best for my eternal soul. My trust and hope is in that promise, not in what is going on with my Mom or Dad."

What do I "put off" and "put on" in idolatry concerning comfort/peace? I remind myself that I cannot find true, life-giving, heart-changing peace from man or my circumstances. In fact, I should EXPECT to get just the opposite because I was saved to be a light, and the people and places that need the light of Christ are difficult people and in difficult places. No, I will not go to the created for what the Creator already is for me. He is my peace. His character and promises are the source of my peace. I need to learn about Him – to research the attributes of God such that when I am feeling a lack of peace and comfort, I can choose to put in the mental effort to remember what God has taught me about Himself and then take my thoughts captive to this truth (2 Cor. 10:5). This is how the Holy Spirit works in a person to produce peace in the inner man.

Each of us needs to identify what must be put off and put on in order for us to begin to bear the fruits of repentance. (Acts 26:20, Eph. 4:22-24) When I am counseling, I give this

assignment to discern idolatry. It is called an Emotion Log:

Write down the negative emotion you experienced. Then answer these four questions:

- 1) What was happening?
- 2) What were you thinking at the time?
- 3) What were you wanting?
- 4) Identify your idolatrous desire and confess it to God by filling in the blanks:

Lord, please forgive me for forsaking You and going to _____ to be the source of _____ for me.
Please help me not to do this, but rather to choose to put in the mental effort to remember Your Truth and then think and act according to it.

How about you today? Stop now and ask God to search your heart concerning the above blanks. Here are some possibilities to consider.

My own good behavior as the source of my righteousness

What people think about me as the source of my identity

A past experience (divorce, abuse) as the source of my identity

My job title as my source of my identity

How much or how many people like me for the source of my approval

A husband, wife, boyfriend, or family member as the source of the affection desired

A husband, wife, parent, family member, money, government, as the source of contentment or happiness

Money as my source of hope or security

Clothing, academics, athletics

The size of my house or type of car I drive as my source for satisfaction

Other possibilities

Fill in these blanks: I have forsaken God and gone to _____
as the source of my _____.

I encourage you to keep a written emotion log with the above four questions to get in the habit of learning how your emotions reveal idolatry, so you can regularly confess to your

loving Father and be cleansed and freed from the enslavement you now see you have chosen.

We began with "Do you wonder why you sin?" We only sin because we have forsaken the Spring of Living Water, and we are out looking elsewhere for what God already is for us. We are not purposefully putting in the forefront of our minds what God has taught us about Himself; and because of that, we forget. Because we forget, we fall out of love; and because we fall out of love, we begin pursuing the things of this world. God is so good to show us this so we can return to the perfect lover of our souls and be satisfied in Him, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:2-4

"May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."

He truly is enough for us. I pray you and I will choose to pull this truth up in our minds and then be "getters" from God such that we are overflowing with His spiritual provision (Ephesians chapters 1-3); and then rather than trying to get, get, get from others, we see our role on this earth to be a giver of God's goodness to all others. What pleasure we bring to our loving Father in doing this! What resulting blessing that brings to us! What freedom that brings to us! What joy we find in that selfless pursuit.

Other Scriptures concerning idolatry:

Colossians 3

Jeremiah 2

Ezekiel 14:3-6

1 Corinthians 10:13-14

Jeremiah 14:22

Ezekiel 20:5-8

Isaiah 42:5-8

Isaiah 44:8-17

1 Samuel 12:20-21

Psalms 78:55-58

Ezekiel 20:16-19

1 Peter 4:1-3



In Bible lands, a cistern was an artificial reservoir which was dug in the earth or hewn in the rock for the collection and storage of water. Cisterns were very important in the land of Israel because of the long dry season and the relatively few natural springs. But a broken cistern was practically worthless. Cracked rock or crumbling masonry could hold only a small quantity of dirty water, or no water at all.

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