

# The gods We Worship

## **“Part 3: Identifying the Idols”**

Genesis 29:31-30:24

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 12, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Genesis 29. It is one of the great speeches in movie history. The movie is *The Fugitive*. Tommy Lee Jones plays a U.S. Marshal whose job it is to hunt down and recapture an escaped convict. He gathers his people and says,
  - ***“Listen up, ladies and gentlemen. Our fugitive has been on the run for ninety minutes. Average foot speed over uneven ground barring injuries is 4 miles an hour and that gives us a radius of six miles. What I want out of each and every one of you is a hard-target search of every gas station, residence, warehouse, farmhouse, henhouse, outhouse and doghouse in that area. Checkpoints go up at fifteen miles. Your fugitive’s name is Doctor Richard Kimble. Go get him.”***
- In part 1 of this series we said we must see the idols – that is to say that we must understand idolatry is not simply bowing before a stone statue. Idolatry is exchanging God for anything else. An idol is anything that holds the ultimate place in our hearts apart from God. We make idols when we take good things like money, achievement, or sex and make them into ultimate things.
  - In part 2 we exposed the idols. Since God created us, God is the only thing that can quench the thirst of our souls. We exposed idols for what they are – cheap substitutes for God that cannot quench our soul’s thirst.
- Today we take the next step – learning how to identify the idols of your heart. But this is not an easy thing to do. Idols are like fugitives. When you try to find them they run and hide themselves.
  - If I asked you to identify four idols in your life and how they control and destroy you I suspect you would have a hard time doing it. This is because, in the words of Jeremiah 2:17, ***“the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can understand it?”***
- So how can we hunt down the idols of our souls when they are so hard to identify? C.S. Lewis gives an illustration, which we will see in the life of Rachel.
  - Lewis says if you want to know if there are rats in your basement, you don’t walk loudly down the stairs announcing your arrival. They will hide themselves before you can see them and you will think there are no rats. But if you creep down the stairs and suddenly turn on the light you will see the rats scurrying away and you will know where they hide.<sup>1</sup>
    - Lewis is saying that if you want to identify your idols then look at your life when your guard is down. What do you think about? Look at your reactions when something unexpected happens to you. Look at your emotional outbursts. These surface moments call attention to what is underneath.
- Rachel’s idols are revealed in what she is most passionate about, in her deepest fears, and in what leads her into conflict with others. Her life gives us three questions to ask of ourselves; three questions that hunt down the fugitive in our souls, three questions that expose the rats.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book IV, chapter 7.

- Let the Holy Spirit, use these questions to flip on the light in your soul. It is rather painful to find out that you have rats but if you want freedom and lasting joy you have to deal with the rat problem.

## QUESTION #1 – WHAT AM I MOST PASSIONATE ABOUT?

- Question #1. Ask yourself: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** What am I most passionate about? What was the driving passion of Rachel’s life? Well what do we know about Rachel? We know that Jacob had two wives who were sisters. The older was named Leah and the younger Rachel. In Genesis 29:17 we learn that *“Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.”* Simply put: she had a hot body and the face of supermodel. Leah on the other hand was rather homely looking. We also read that Jacob loved Rachel but not Leah.
  - So Rachel had everything she wanted except one thing. What she really wanted were children. She had to sit by and watch as her elder sister gave birth to six sons and she was still barren. You can just imagine the burn in her soul as she watched Jacob laughing and wrestling with Leah’s sons.
    - Now is it idolatrous to want children? Not at all. That is a good desire. But this good desire became Rachel’s ultimate desire. It was the controlling passion of her life – all she thought about, committed herself to, and worked for.
- If you want to identify your idols then a good place to start is by looking at what you are most passionate about. Look at three different areas. In order to discover what you are most passionate about **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** look at what captures your imagination.
  - Archbishop William Temple once said, **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** *“Your religion is what you do with your solitude.”* Tim Keller writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** *“the true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material good such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? One or two daydreams are no indication of idolatry. Ask rather, what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart.”*<sup>2</sup>
    - If it is anything but God you may have identified a potential idol.
- Second, **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** look at what you are committed to.
  - You know you are passionate about something if you freely and joyfully sacrifice your time to it. Author Joshua Harris tells us about Robert, a fun loving guy who loved God, his job, and life. Harris writes, *“But if you really want to see Robert excited, ask him about his Jeep. He talks about it like it’s a person. ‘She’s my baby,’ he says affectionately... ‘Once I got the Jeep...well, of course I had to join the Jeep club,’ explains Robert. The local club had over fifteen hundred active members. It offered meetings, parties, trail runs, and a website where members could exchange Jeep tips. ‘It’s a whole Jeep community,’ Robert says. Through the club Robert hooked up with guys who taught him the finer points of four wheeling. As his Jeep-discipleship intensified Robert’s commitment only deepened. ‘I was totally hooked,’ he says. Every free moment was consumed. I was either working on a Jeep, planning a Jeep run, hanging out and talking Jeep, or going on-line to check our Jeep website.”*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 168.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church*, 63-64.

- We can all chuckle at Robert. It is so obvious that his passion for his Jeep is the really god of his life – he loves it, serves, and delights in it. But as Harris goes on to say we all have our own version of the Jeep club – some interest or pursuit that we care deeply about. It may be a hobby, sport, career, or education. It might be a preoccupation with technology, health, political party, a cause or a relationship.
        - So what is your Jeep Club? What is the thing that you are committed to? What is the thing you give your time to without any complaint? That is what you are passionate about there you have a potential idol.
- The third way to discover your controlling passions is to **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** look at what you spend your money on.
  - Jesus said, *“where your treasure is, there is your heart also.”* That leads Tim Keller to say, **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** *“You will always give effortlessly to that which is your salvation, to those things that give your life meaning. If Jesus is the One who saved you, your money flows out easily into His work, his people, His causes. If, however, your real religion is your appearance, your social status, or your pleasure, your money flows most easily into those items and symbols.”*
    - Elsewhere he writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** *“The mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you must try to exercise self control constantly. Our patterns of spending reveal our idols.”*<sup>4</sup> What you spend your money reveals what you are passionate about and there you have a potential idol.
- Now let me keep reiterating something lest you get led down a wrong path. All these things are good. Jeeps are good. Clothing is good. Children are good. We should be passionate about these things. The question is what place they have in our souls. What we are always doing is taking these good things and making them the ultimate things we live for. Whatever you are most passionate about that is your god.
  - So what is God revealing to you right now? What is the controlling passion of your life? Let me encourage you this week to sit down with a paper and pen. Ask God to search your heart and write out your passions. Many of your passions may be rightly ordered under God but I suspect that like me, your passions, can quickly become idolatrous.

## QUESTION #2 – WHAT IS MY GREATEST NIGHTMARE?

- So if you want to identify your idols ask first ‘what am I most passionate about?’ Second, ask: **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** what is my greatest nightmare?
  - Look at verse 1-2. **READ 1-2** - *When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”* Elyse Fitzpatrick writes, *“Rachel’s desire for children was so strong that it had twisted her thinking. She began to believe that it was Jacob rather than God who was controlling her fertility, her position, her life.”*<sup>5</sup> Rachel believed that if she could just have children like her sister Leah then she would be happy.
    - Her greatest nightmare therefore was the thought that she might never have children. We know this because when she cannot have children she falls apart emotionally so much that she does not believe life is even worth living.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 168.

<sup>5</sup> Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 21.

- But Rachel’s idols failed her like they fail us all. In time God granted her request for children but she was still not happy. Look at verse 22. **READ 22-24** - *Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” And she called his name Joseph, saying, “May the Lord add to me another son!”* She was not happy with just one son. She wanted another.
  - She did conceive again but she died in childbirth. As she was dying she named him ‘Benoni’ which means ‘son of my sorrow.’ Elyse Fitzpatrick writes, *“What she had worshipped and thought would bring her blessing ended up causing her death. What she thought would bring her joy brought her sorrow instead. It is ironic, isn’t it, that the woman who cried ‘give me children or I’ll die!’ died in childbirth.”*<sup>6</sup>
- Rachel’s idol was revealed in her fears – in her greatest nightmare. So how about you? What is your greatest nightmare? What are your fears? **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** What, if you lost it, or could not get it, would make life not worth living?
  - Fill in Rachel’s sentence in your life: Give me \_\_\_\_\_, or I’ll die! What would you write in that blank? What must I have for my life to have worth and meaning? If it is anything but God then that’s what functions as a god for me.
    - For instance if you fear not having enough money or you must have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom and possessions to make life worth living then you will serve money. If you say I must have a particular look or body then image has become the god you will serve. If you fear being rejected by people then approval has become an idol.
- Remember the rats in the basement being exposed by the light. One of the best ways to light up your soul is to look at your fears, to look at your emotional outbursts. What must you have to be happy? What do you fear losing?
  - Jesus came to free us from fear.

### QUESTION #3: WHAT BRINGS ME INTO CONFLICT WITH OTHERS?

- There is one final thing we learn from Rachel about how to identify our idols. The third question to ask is: **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** what unfulfilled desires bring me into conflict with others?
  - This whole chapter is a conflict between two women. It is a conflict between two idols. Leah’s idol, as we will see in a few weeks is relational intimacy – romance. Although Leah can have children she cannot gain her husband’s love. Rachel, on the other hand, has her husband’s love but finds her life’s worth in the children she cannot have.
    - Bruce Waltke writes, *“Each woman wants what the other has, and neither treasures what she has been given for its own value.”*<sup>7</sup>
- Genesis 30 describes the conflict that happens as the gods of each sister clash with each other. The gods are always violent. The conflict reveals Rachel’s idols.
  - Instead of praying with her husband for a child Rachel turns on her husband and blames him. Her idols are also revealed in her conflict with Leah. Look at verse 8 for instance. **READ 8** - *Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali.* Naphtali means ‘my struggle.’ So just to rub it in her sister’s face she names her son Naphtali. Every time someone calls his name around the house Rachel gloats in her victory over Leah.

<sup>6</sup> Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 411.

- This is one dysfunctional family. All the dysfunction arises from idolatry.
- Conflict is everywhere. It is inevitable. But have you ever stopped to ask why it is that your anger flares up so quickly? Paul Tripp rightly points out that when we are angry we usually blame something or someone outside ourselves – ‘she makes me so angry.’ ‘This traffic drives me crazy!’ ‘He just pushes my buttons.’<sup>8</sup>
  - But it should be obvious that other people are not the reason you get angry. The person that you get so angry is well like by others. So where does conflict come from?
- Turn with me to the book of James 4. If you want to understand why you get into conflict with others James tells you the secret. **READ 1-2** - *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.*
  - This is profound stuff. James says that you will never understand your anger and relational breakdowns by looking outside yourself. He says you must look inward. But James is more specific than that – what is it that causes fights and quarrels? Desires.
    - Paul Tripp outlines the five steps that precede every conflict you have.<sup>9</sup> Many times you will go through all five of these in a matter of a few seconds.

## THE FIVE STEPS THAT LEAD TO CONFLICT

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** First, your good desire morphs into demand. For instance, you’ve worked hard all day. Throughout the day you think how nice it would be to relax quietly at home in the evening with a good book, a hockey game, or cup of tea. Now that is a good desire. Notice that James does not say conflict begins with ‘evil desires’ but simply with desires. As long as desires are held with an open hand in submission to God’s kingdom they are good but when you close your fist around a desire it morphs into a demand. You decide that you must have a night of relaxation.
  - The second thing that happens is that **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** demand morphs into need. You now view a night of relaxation as essential to your happiness. Not only must you do this you have now decided that you will follow this desire. This is where you become enslaved to the desire. When a demand morphs into a need it will affect your relationship with others.
    - The third thing that happens is **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** needs produces expectations. Once you are convinced that you need something you will then believe that others must help you get it or at least not stand in the way of you getting it. So as you enter the door you tell your wife your plans and ask her to put the kids down so you can relax. But then she says, *“Actually, I need you to take our son to his swimming lessons and then I need a bunch of help cleaning the house for the party tomorrow.”*
- When she says that you quickly move to step 4. The good desire that morphed into a demand, which morphed into a need, which produced **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** expectations now instantly lead to disappointment. My wife has failed to meet my expectations. I believe that she should recognize my desire for relaxation but she didn’t. **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** Disappointment then quickly reacts with punishment. Because you didn’t meet my desire I will now seek to punish you through complaining, impatience, the silent treatment, or angry words.

<sup>8</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemers Hands*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemers Hands*, 86-88.

- Now let me ask you what has caused the conflict? I had a good desire that I allowed to take control of me. Once this happens relaxation functions as the god; all things and people must serve this god and bow before it. When my wife got in the way of the fulfillment of my desire I reacted. My god was relaxation.
  - ***“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it.”***
- So if you want to identify your idols ask yourself: what unfulfilled desires lead me into conflict. Once you learn to see idolatry as a matter of desires you will quickly see that idols are constantly being raised in your heart.
  - That is why, after reflecting on Rachel's life, John Calvin wrote that the human heart is a ***“perpetual factory of idols.”***<sup>10</sup> Our hearts mass produce idols because every desire we have can so quickly turn from a good desire to a ruling desire that demands all else bow to it. If you want to have better relationships look at what desires you have that lead you into conflict. Identify your idols.

## **A BARREN WOMAN AND A VIRGIN WOMAN**

- Once you see that your heart is an assembly line that mass-produces idols you should fall to your knees. For you realize that you are guilty of breaking the first command to have no other gods. You realize that you constantly cherish other things more than God.
  - You also realize that you are incapable of changing your heart. Who among us is not guilty? We are all idolaters. What hope is there then?
- Well, a few thousand years later God met another woman had been barren her entire life. An angel of the Lord said to her husband, ***“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.”*** The angel said that John's life calling was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. To ready them for the baby who come not through a barren woman but through a virgin.
  - John spent his life calling people away from their idols and back to God. And then one day as he was baptizing in the river he saw Jesus approaching and John said, ***“Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** The son of the barren woman pointed everyone to the son of the virgin.
- Jesus meets what we need most. First, he can forgive the sin of our idolatry.
  - At the cross Jesus took upon himself all of our idolatries, bearing the wrath of God in our place on the cross, dying the death that we should have died for worshipping anything else but God, and rising triumphant from the grave.
- Second, as the risen and reigning King he is in the business of conquering hearts.
  - We cannot change our desires but Jesus can. We pray, ‘let your kingdom come.’ In the weeks to come we will examine some specific idols and show how we dethrone our idols.
- In order to prepare for this I want to call you to take some serious time this week to allow the Spirit of God to hunt down the fugitives of your soul. Take your Bible, a paper and pen, and ask him to flip on the light in the basement of your soul. Print off this manuscript from our website and work through the questions.
  - Ask God to help you identify your idols that you might turn away from them and be free; that you might come back to the living God who alone can satisfy.

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<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter 11, Section 8.