

Idolatry and Insecurity

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[0 : 00] It's really easy to lose perspective. When I was younger, I think I was a fairly typical kid, and I basically thought that the world revolved around me. I saw all the people in my life as existing to serve me, not like consciously or explicitly, but that's basically the way I thought things were supposed to work.

And the result of that approach is that I didn't do very well when things didn't go my way. I could throw a tanty with the best of them, pretty good at sulking, pretty good at holding a grudge. And as just an icing on the cake, I also had a violent temper that would flare fairly easily. So generally, I was pretty much a delight to have around. And as a young kid, the major source of frustration in my life, the thing that was most likely to spark me, was the lack of McDonald's. So I would ask my parents all the time to take me to McDonald's. I just loved it. And we'd be driving past McDonald's, and I'd be sitting in the seat behind my parents making indicator sounds to try and subliminally tell my parents to hit the indicator and turn in.

So we'd be driving along. There'd be this tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. You can imagine how joyful that was for my parents. And look, every time we drove past, where we lived, there was a McDonald's in every direction that you would possibly go.

[1 : 13] So any outing that we went on as a family, that's twice that trip, I would be going tick, tick, tick. And McDonald's expansion has been impressive. So sometimes it was more than twice. Every time we'd drive past the McDonald's, I'd be like tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, and getting more intense as we got closer.

I love McDonald's. And let's be honest, I still love McDonald's. But I remember one time in particular, we're driving past McDonald's on the way home, and I'm sitting in the back making indicator noises as fiercely as I can.

And Dad, who's driving, completely sick of it, decides that instead of yelling at me, he'll put the indicator on and turn into McDonald's.

And I'm internally doing cartwheels, but trying to play it cool, like, I don't mind either way. This is nice of you, Dad. You know, it's really good that we can have some McDonald's. Dad pulls into the car park, finds a spot, gets in there, turns the keys off, turns the keys back on, reverses out and drives home, thinking it's the funniest thing ever.

Now, it's fair to say that I did not handle this situation with much poise. There was a fairly substantial tantrum. There may have been some swearing. I may have cried about the injustice.

[2 : 19] It's okay, I was only about 15. And I still haven't fully recovered. I was younger than 15, just to clarify. I haven't fully recovered. It still is a point of damage in my early childhood and relationship with my parents.

But once I settled down, Dad sat me down because he figured this had gotten to a point where we actually need to deal with this crazy child. And I remember when he sat me down to talk about it, he explained what it was like for kids living in poverty.

Now, my dad, for a job, would spend six months of every year traveling around Africa filming to make documentaries and ads, the kind of ones you see for 40-hour famine and sponsored children and that sort of stuff.

So he would literally spend one day looking at a child who was dying of starvation through a camera and two days later have some whingy kid in the back having a tantrum about not being allowed to eat McDonald's.

And I remember hearing this and thinking, it makes sense to me. I understand how ridiculous my actions sound. But it's hard to hold on to that reality of that child starving when it just seems so far away.

[3 : 25] And it wasn't until I was about 13 that I got to go on a work trip with Dad to Africa. And I got to see with my own eyes what it was like for children living in poverty who were my age on the other side of the world.

And I remember really distinctly that on this trip, I was sitting on the floor of a mud hut. A family had us over in the village where we were filming. And they served us some rice and some chicken that this family had cooked for us.

And it tasted absolutely disgusting. But I knew enough sitting there that I needed to eat it and not complain. Because as I'm sitting there with a bowl of rice and chicken and my dad as well and the other people on the film crew that were there, the family is sitting watching us eat because there's not enough food for both us and them to eat.

I was basically taking a meal that this family would have had as their only meal for the day. And in reality, I was probably having their best meal of the month because they would have had to kill a chicken to make this happen.

And I remember sitting there feeling incredibly guilty about every time that I complained that there was mushrooms on my plate. Or whinge to my parents that I couldn't have a second glass of Coke.

[4 : 33] Or sat in the back of the car making indicator noises or having tantrums because I wasn't getting McDonald's. This new perspective that I had when I returned home lasted about a week.

Before long, I'm in the back of the car. I'm making indicator sounds. I'm whinging that we didn't go to McDonald's. It's not that I didn't care about what I'd seen.

It's not that it didn't have a real impact on me. It's just that it's really easy to lose perspective when things like that go out of your field of vision. I mean, that situation felt so far away and all I could see was the big golden arches on the side of the road and a mental image of me enjoying a cheeseburger.

It's easy to lose perspective. It's easy to lose sight of the reality of the things that are supposed to shape and define who we are and the way that we function.

Last week, when we were looking at Galatians in the section just before this, Paul was trying to remind the Galatians what God has already done for them in Jesus. He was reminding them about how they were rescued out of slavery, how they were adopted into God's family, how they were made sons and daughters and heirs.

[5 : 49] But they've lost perspective. It's not that they're going back to their old pattern of life. It's not that they're turning back to that slavery. But as they lose sight of what God has done, they lose sight of the cross.

They're turning away from him and towards a new slave master. They're essentially exchanging one slavery for another slavery.

In this book of Galatians, over and over and over, there's two things that Paul is pushing against, two different types of slavery. And they're equally wrong, equally dangerous, equally useless when it comes to approaching God.

But they're also quite distinct. Have a look at the first one there in verse 8. Paul says, Now, this slavery is a slavery that masquerades as freedom.

It's the attitude that says to the God, you're not going to be my God, I'm going to be in charge. I'm going to choose who I worship. I'm going to choose how I function. I'm going to choose how I live. And for the Galatians, they were literally, physically worshipping other gods.

[7 : 03] Think temples. Think sacrifices. Think gods for rain. Gods for fertility. Gods for harvest. Gods for whatever else they needed. Gods that aren't really gods. Gods that are powerless to deliver.

Powerless to provide the significance and the purpose for life and the satisfaction that we as humans desire. And it was slavery for them. It was slavery because it demanded much from them. They still had to go through jumping through the hoops of sacrifice and all these other things. It promised a lot. Promised fertility and harvest and prosperity. But it only delivered frustration. It didn't actually get them anywhere. It didn't actually deliver the satisfaction and the purpose that they were after. That's the slavery that God rescued them from by sending Jesus to die on the cross.

In dying in their place, he takes the punishment they deserve for substituting the God who creates all things for made up, no gods that are powerless and ineffective. God had rescued them from that and invited them to become his children.

[8 : 15] That's slavery one in the book of Galatians. It's irreligious. It's rebellious. It's God gets stuffed. That's slavery one. But the second one is a bit more subtle.

Have a look at verse 9. But now that you know God, or rather are known by God, let's just stop there quickly for a sec, because this is an anthem that Paul keeps hitting in this book.

What's happened? They do know God now. Because of what Jesus has done, they do know God. But he wants to make it clear, never for a second are they to take credit for that. They do know God, but what's really going on is they're now known by God.

He's the one who's done the work to welcome them into a relationship. That's worth picking out, that he makes the effort to make sure we don't get confused there. Now that you know God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces?

Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you that somehow I've wasted my efforts on you.

[9 : 23] It's there in verse 10, the second slavery. Observing special days, months, seasons and years. So it's different to straight up pagan worship. It's different to statues and sacrifices and that sort of stuff.

But it's connected. Because Paul says, why would you turn back? Why would you return? It says, to the same weak and miserable forces that enslaved the Galatians.

Now, when he says seasons, months, years, etc. That's shorthand for Jewish stuff. That's shorthand for Jewish festivals like Passover, for Sabbath, all those sorts of things.

He's basically saying that these people who've come in, these false teachers who've turned up in your churches and said, look, we know you were forgiven by Jesus, but now you've got to be Jewish if you're going to really stay in the family.

Now you've got to obey our festivals. You've got to do things our way. You've got to follow our customs. He's saying that that is the same kind of slavery as this.

[10 : 27] Paul sees these churches, these people that he loves and cares for, being led back into a slavery that will just disappoint and frustrate and hurt them.

And he responds with this emphatic, no, don't turn back. Don't swap one slavery for another. Don't lose perspective. Don't forget the situation that you're in before Jesus saved you.

Don't forget that Jesus saved you. Don't forget how Jesus saved you. Because there's no other gospel. There's no other good news. This thing they're selling where you have to follow Jewish tradition, that's not good news.

Not for sinful people like us. Jesus alone can free you from slavery. Jesus' death on the cross and his rising to life alone can set us free and make us sons and daughters.

Now it's really important that you catch what's going on here. I would hazard a guess that there's not a lot of us in this room who are actively engaged in this kind of pagan worship.

[11 : 38] Not a lot of us probably have statues in our living room that we're burning incense to. I don't know that we're making animal sacrifices, those sorts of things, although you might be. And if you are, I want to say that this passage and many other places in Scripture make it clear that if you are in that place, you are currently enslaved by weak, miserable non-gods that can't deliver.

But I would guess that for the majority of us in this room, the idea of literally worshipping another god like that, we know that's bad.

We know that's not a good idea. But what Paul is saying here is that religion, religious activities, can be just as bad.

The non-god demonic forces that exist over here that aren't gods but are still evil and are still sucking us in are the same ones that are going to try and suck us in over here to do religious things. So if church attendance or serving in ministry or trying to be moral or holy are things that you think will make God love you more or you think will be enough to save you, then you are just as enslaved as the person who's bowing down to the statue.

[13 : 03] In our context, this is a trap for so many people. Think about how many extra people turn up and sit in these seats twice a year at Easter and Christmas.

Now I want to make it clear that our church is a safe place for people to come in whether they're following Jesus or not. This is a good place to come and hear the gospel. You are welcome if you're not a Christian.

We are glad that you're here. But can you see the danger that for those people, Easter and Christmas is their annual keep God happy, tick the box trip. God's not impressed.

That is worshipping the non-God of your own effort, your own goodness, your own jumping through the hoops and being religious. The only thing that brings freedom is Jesus.

And these Galatians have tasted the goodness of being loved and forgiven. They've started the journey. They've been released once already and have been adopted into God's family. And so Paul is pleading with them, don't turn back.

[14:09] Don't choose slavery. Instead, verse 12, I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me. For I became like you.

Paul says, be like me. He's not being vain. He's not saying, I'm really holy. Try and be holy like me. Try and do good things like me.

That's not what he's doing. He's saying, in Jesus, I'm free. He's saying, because of what Jesus has done, I am free. Paul is living with the reality of the cross front and center in all he does.

The way he sees himself, the way he sees his circumstances, the way he sees the world around him is defined by what Jesus has done. We won't get the chance to go into it too much.

But just down a bit, you'll see that the reason Paul preached to the Galatians in the first place was not because it was the next step on his missionary journey. But he got stuck there with an illness. And because he knew the gospel and because he knew that Jesus was sitting on the throne and he was in control, because he'd listened to Ash's puppet show last week, that God's word about the risen Jesus cannot be stopped or whatever it was.

[15:24] Because he said, OK, this is where I am. So this is where I'll preach. The gospel defined how he viewed his situation, how he viewed his own life.

And so he was free. And he's looking at these Galatians and they're turning to the slavery that he was rescued from. See, Paul existed over here. He was the Jew who went to church 10 times a day, who memorized all his scriptures, who was a leader in the ministries.

He was doing all those things, but he was enslaved. And now because of Jesus, he knows what it is to be free and to be adopted. And when he turned up to these Gentiles who didn't have the law, who didn't have the Jewish tradition, who didn't have all the things that he was used to, because of Jesus, he was free to let go of a whole bunch of this stuff and live with them.

Because of Jesus, he was able to let go of the things that he used to think would save him so that he could show these people who are nothing like him that Jesus was enough. That in fact, only Jesus was enough.

Paul has such security in the gospel that he can let go of everything else. When he says, be like me, he's saying, be free.

[16:43] He's saying, always trust Jesus. Never lose perspective. Never turn back. Jesus is alive. Jesus is on the throne. You are forgiven.

You are adopted. Never lose that gospel perspective. And remember that gospel perspective doesn't just look back to what God has already done.

It takes us forward as well. Have a look at verse 19. Remember the goal.

Christ formed in you. Having rescued you. Having forgiven you. Having adopted you. God is now in the business of transforming you progressively to be more like Jesus.

Not just for the sake of it. But so that you can one day fully and forever enjoy the benefits of being a son or daughter of God. As Christians for us today and for the Galatians back when this was written, we exist in this in-between bit.

[18:03] Jesus has turned up and he's died on the cross and he has risen and he has forgiven those who put their trust in him. He has adopted us to be sons or daughters. That is done and finished. But on this side, we still drag some of our old slavery with us, don't we?

We still sometimes live like slaves. We still sometimes sin and ignore God. We still sometimes do the wrong thing. But the gospel also promises that over here Jesus is coming back.

That when he returns, he will finally and fully get rid of all the sin, the slavery, the death, all the things that are in between us. And being with our heavenly father face to face in a perfect new creation for all eternity.

That's the goal of the gospel. That's why Jesus came. That's why he forgives us. That's why he draws us into the family. That we might be face to face with God forever. Enjoying all that he is and all that he has prepared for us.

And so every step between now, between what Jesus has done and between that future is an opportunity for us to be transformed a little bit more. For us to be prepared a little bit better for the

eternity that God has for those who belong to him.

[19 : 16] That's the goal. Face to face with God, enjoying him forever. And every day now is an opportunity to take a step towards that goal.

Gospel perspective. The thing that makes us lose that perspective is insecurity.

This is the issue in the whole book of Galatians. This is the issue that keeps coming up sermon after sermon. It's going to keep coming up for the last couple of chapters. This is the issue throughout scripture.

This is the issue throughout our lives. This is our default position. Is that in spite of what Jesus has already done, in this bit in the middle, we begin to wonder if he still loves us.

We begin to feel a bit unsure about whether we're actually his children. Whether we're still his children. Whether we're holding on. And the issue is that insecurity.

[20 : 16] And what we do with it when we feel it. Because it comes from a place that's half true. The things that were true of us before we met Jesus that make us unsure.

We think, I'm sinful and I'm unworthy. Yes, you are. But Jesus has died and forgiven you and adopted you into the family. So you're secure. You think, but I'm still sinning.

Yeah, you probably are. But you're in the family now. And God's doing a work to progressively get rid of that sin in you. See, what insecurity does is it pushes us in one of three equally dangerous but different directions.

The first place it might push you is into effort. Into religion. So what you do is you know you're not good enough. And what your insecurity does is drive you to try and do enough good things to make up for the bad things to somehow balance your ledger.

So you start observing special days and months and seasons and festivals. You start going to church that little bit more. Serving that little bit more. Reading your Bible that little bit more.

[21 : 25] Hoping that it will settle the account and you'll have covered the bad stuff. But it doesn't work. So you just end up digging yourself deeper and deeper and feeling more insecure because you can't quite catch up.

Plus the gospel says that doesn't work. The gospel says that when we go to that place of effort and thinking we're somehow going to be able to do it ourselves, we haven't actually understood what the problem is.

We haven't actually understood that the reason we were enslaved, the reason we were cut off from God is our sin. That that's not something that you can fix with effort. Sin is so offensive to God.

Sin is so serious and so costly that it requires death. If you're somebody who's following Jesus and the word effort echoes with what it feels like for you to be a Christian, it could be that you've lost sight of just how serious the problem is.

And you've begun to think maybe I can deal with it myself. The gospel releases you from that. The gospel says this is too big for you. But God has provided a savior.

[22 : 42] God has provided somebody to deal with what you cannot. The first dangerous direction that insecurity will push you is effort. The second is rejection.

You just give up because it's too hard. Maybe this is something that you've said yourself. I try but I fail and I'm just not comfortable. I don't like being reminded that I'm not good enough.

I don't like being told that I'm sinful. So I'm out. Maybe that's something you've heard from people who used to sit next to you in church. And it all flows out of an insecurity.

Out of a fear. But the gospel says to those who would reject Jesus, you haven't understood grace. You haven't understood that God loves you at your worst.

You haven't understood that before you did good or bad things, God had already decided he was going to love you before the creation of the world. You haven't understood that he knows your deepest, darkest secrets.

[23 : 45] You haven't understood that there's an ongoing work in you. He doesn't demand perfection now. He loves you as you are and he begins the process of forgiving you.

If you are someone who feels hopeless, like it's all too hard, the gospel says you need to look again at the grace that God has shown you.

The last direction, and one I just want to focus on for a couple of minutes, is insecurity can push you into denial. I think this is a danger for a lot of us sitting in churches today.

Listen to what Paul says about the Galatians in verse 13. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. And even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not

treat me with contempt or scorn.

Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. It's a little snapshot of just how loving these people were towards Paul when they first met him.

[24 : 52] When they first heard the gospel, they were so thankful to know that they were sinful and that God had provided a savior. They were rejoicing at even this offensive message that they needed a savior because there was one on offer.

They were so moved by that, so secure in God's love that they would gladly, sacrificially bear the cost of caring for Paul and looking after him in his illness. But then, we hit verse 15.

Where then is your blessing of me now? I can testify that if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? The Galatians didn't like feeling insecure. And that's perfectly reasonable. But their solution was denial. Their solution was, we don't want to hear the truth anymore.

[25 : 53] This other option that these people are offering to us of doing religious stuff sounds easier. All we've got to do there is just, you know, church a couple of times a week, get circumcised, only eat certain foods, and then God has to love us.

It was a delusion, but it sounded easier. And so they stopped listening to the truth. I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with Facebook.

I get myself in trouble if I post too often or if I comment things. I have to check them with my wife now before I go online. But something has become clear to me about Facebook and social media recently, after reading a few articles about it.

When you're on Facebook, when you're on social media, you have access to opinions and articles and news. But of the billions of things that are out there floating around online, the ones that you see are the ones that your friendship network posts, likes, or shares.

And what sorts of people are in your friendship network? People like you. That is, people who think like you. Who like the things that you like.

[27 : 03] And what that means is that without some self-awareness, social media can become this massive echo chamber that just affirms and reinforces what we have already decided we think.

So we convince ourselves that we're engaged in this critical analysis, but deep down we're just looking for people to say the stuff that we were thinking so that we can then just be firmer in thinking that.

Case in point. The current same-sex marriage debate, plebiscite, vote, whatever you want to call it. If you move in conservative Christian circles, the commentary that you'll be seeing on social media is that the no case is gaining ground.

If you move in slightly more liberal or left-leaning circles, you'll be seeing a commentary that says that the yes vote is going to win this with close to a three-to-one majority.

Now, which of those is true is irrelevant for this point right now? The point is, we now exist in a world that only hears and only wants to hear what we already believe to be true.

[28 : 15] That's our starting point. We don't want to hear truth that might challenge us or make us uncomfortable. And what happens is, as we hear this truth that we've already pre-selected, is we get a false security.

It affirms a wrong perspective of us that we must be in the majority because everybody thinks what I think. That everybody is all the people who I have selectively chosen because they think what I think, but we don't think that deeply about it.

And so we get a false security and a wrong perspective of ourselves and of the gospel and we become hardened to hearing truth. The Galatians don't like being insecure and neither do we. But we must be careful not to take what seems like the easy way out of just ticking boxes and doing religion and observing festivals to make God happy.

Granted, it's easier than facing the reality that you and I are still sinful and that that is deeply offensive to the God who gave his son that we might be part of the family.

[29 : 22] It's easier than facing the reality that in this moment I need grace as much as the first moment that I discovered it. For the Galatian Christians and for a lot of us, when we first start following Jesus, there is this period of drastic change where we're so secure in the gospel that we just enjoy loving people sacrificially.

Where we're so secure in God's love for us that we delight in things like confessing sin and repenting and wanting to be changed and wanting to be more like Jesus. But for so many of us, that period eventually slides back into insecurity because that's our default setting.

We just work our way back into insecurity and then into denial. Into, you can't tell me I'm wrong. That's what you think. We stop wanting to change.

We settle into a, you know, I'm better than I was at the beginning. We forget that the gospel has a goal for us. That the goal is not me being pretty good or better than I was. The goal is that I will be face to face with a holy, pure God and there is so much more that needs to be done in us if we're going to be ready for that.

We forget that Christ is not yet fully formed in us. There's more growth to come. We lose perspective.

[30 : 53] As a 13 year old, I quickly had my perspective defined by the things that were right in front of me. So starving kids faded out and was quickly replaced with cheeseburgers.

It wasn't until I returned to Africa a few years later with, again with my dad, that my perspective was realigned. Reality hadn't shifted in those few years but my perspective had.

And now 20 years later, I'm conscious of how quickly those realities fade out of my view if I don't make myself see and acknowledge what is true. When we forget, we lose perspective.

It's the same for us as Christians. Insecurity is the default setting for us between these two points. It is where our heart will naturally go as we look at a world around us full of pain and suffering, as we look at the sin in our own lives and the repeated failure.

Insecurity is our default setting and it will drive us back into the slavery of effort, the slavery of denial, the slavery of even rejection of God only if we allow the gospel to slip out of our view.

[32 : 12] Because nobody feels insecure in God's love when they first encounter it. No one feels unsure about God's forgiveness when they're kneeling in the shadow of the empty cross or when they're standing in front of an empty tomb.

We lose perspective when we leave the gospel behind. And we need Jesus in every moment of every day.

We need to know that he's on the throne. We need the cross as the lens through which we view everything, ourselves, our circumstances, the people around us, the world around us. We have been rescued.

We have been adopted. We have a goal face to face with Jesus. The gospel gives us perspective because Jesus is on the throne.

We know who we used to be. We know what God has done. We know where we're going. So hear the encouragement of Paul this morning.

[33 : 25] Don't turn back. Don't lose perspective. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.