

Study Questions

These questions are intended to help guide conversation within a group or classroom setting, but they may also assist an individual reader seeking to further explore the issue of idolatry on a deeper level.

Introduction

Often we project our own idealized notions of ourselves and our beliefs on to a person or movement. Consider what celebrities, politicians, or causes you are passionate about and ask yourself:

In what ways do I find my own sense of myself affirmed in what I admire?

Do I sometimes allow that admiration to overrule occasional instincts to doubt, constructively criticize or question, when things seem not-quite-right?

Have I ever dropped a friend or argued with a family member over my allegiance to this person or group?

Chapter One: God before Us

The human heart craves attention; self-knowledge keeps us grounded and less inclined to create or to indulge idols hewn from the depths of our longing.

Do I truly believe God loves me, exactly as I am? If not, why not? If so, how can it be?

Pondering that answer, how much of what I attribute to God's thoughts and ways reflect my own thoughts and ways?

What would happen if I invited Christ Jesus to stand between me and my anxieties? What if I invited him to stand between me and how I understand myself?

Chapter Two: God after Us: The Idol of I

A thought is a thing, and whether we nourish it or dash it against the cross of Christ has a great deal to do with whether the thought controls us, or we control it.

What behavior do I identify within myself that screams "I am good" and seeks outside affirmation? (Gossip? Vanity? Scrupulosity? Certainty?)

How can these tendencies become idols?

Which of the beatitudes speaks to me the least? Why is that?

Chapter Three: The Idol of the Idea

Nothing grows in "no"; this is particularly true when our labels and practices become so inflexible and narrow that neither light nor air can squeeze their way into the way we think.

How do I define myself in ten words?

How have I branded myself within those words? What are they shorthand for?

Which of these words might trap me in an unproductive “no”? What or who does this close me away from?

Chapter Four: The Idol of Prosperity

It is no sin to be prosperous, but simplicity frees us from material trappings and instincts to hoard or to distract ourselves. This brings real freedom but our society can make us doubt that.

How accurately do I think my possessions reflect my understanding of myself?

What do I really value in my life? What can I not do without?

Where does God fit in that answer?

Chapter Five: The Idol of Technology

“As long as I assume that the world is something I discover by turning on the radio . . . I am deceived from the start” (Thomas Merton, see page 68).

Have I ever been tempted to check my phone or computer for e-mail and social media updates while in a meeting, or at church, in class, or while gathered with family and friends? How often do I indulge this temptation?

What am I getting online that I am not getting elsewhere?

Our human hearts are restless. Where do I find real rest? How often do I take my heart there?

Chapter Six: *The Idols of Coolness and Sex*

Being thought of as “out of touch” is almost unbearable for most of us, but the energy needed to stay up-to-date always costs us something. Our habits become superficial and “out of touch” with our own deeper selves.

Name three cool people and explain why they are cool.

What expectations do I place on the things and people in my life to be cool? Am I embarrassed when I see a parent—or for that matter a school or church—try too hard to be cool?

How much of being cool involves harboring contempt for others?

If this is so, how can Jesus be cool?

Chapter Seven: *The Idol of Plans*

When we make a plan, we feel safer and more certain of our future than when we take the world on, willy-nilly. Almost nothing is harder than really trusting God to lead us well.

What are some current plans of mine that I am really looking forward to following through on?

When I see a plan being changed, how do I react?

Can I think of a time in my life when a sudden change of plans (or an unplanned event) ended up being better than my expectations could imagine?

Chapter Eight: *The Super Idols*

Super Idols are created when we become so enthralled with an idea that we lose sight not only of God but of the humanity of others.

In a general way, what three enthrallments could become a Super Idol?

To what enthrallment am I most susceptible?

How can I “move beyond God” and still have a relationship with God?

Chapter Nine: *Through the Looking Glass: Super Idols and Language*

Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” In an age of “truthiness,” where important words communicating profound realities (love, peace, sacrifice) are overused or inappropriately used, it is a question worth repeating.

What word do I use so much that it has become more of a sound than something of meaning?

If it is objectively true to say “it is raining” and subjectively true to say “it is nice out,” when can truth actually be untrue?

How hard is it, in our society or among my friends, to call anything false?

Words like “sacrifice” or “love” or “peace” speak powerfully within the life of faith. Do I use them too casually? How do they change in meaning when I demand them of others, or others demand them of me?

When can hate feel like love?

Chapter Ten: *The People of Gods*

Our minds create idols continuously. Even as we bat one down, another pops up; this can happen even as we try to engage in worship.

How might it be possible for a particular church community or parish to indulge in idolatry?

Have I recognized idolatry in my life, or been able to acknowledge it to God and another?

What good is this awareness?

Conclusion: *My Dreadful Idol*

Not everything we cherish is an idol, nor is every idea. Still, it is a worthwhile practice to ask regularly, “Am I allowing myself to erect this thing, or this idea, or this person as a barrier between God and me?”

How can an examination of conscience help me to identify idols and also help us see my other sins more clearly?

How might a regular practice of prayer help curb my tendency to create idols?

What favorite prayer, psalm, or verse of scripture of mine might be a useful tool in breaking my instincts to create idols?