

Series: HOLY COWS: The Idols Nobody Wants to Talk About

July 4, 2010

THE IDOL OF LOVE

Genesis 29-30; Judges 14, 16

1. How many of you think love is a **big deal** in our culture? Well, it's always been a big deal—but what's going on in **our** culture way outstrips **anything** that's ever gone on in history. We are a culture love with love. Listen to any list of songs on the radio, and I'll bet at least half...or more...have to do with either love—or the pain that comes from loving...and not being loved. What do you think are some of the top love songs of the past few years? Shout them out!

-What was even more revealing were some of the, "You done me wrong" songs!

"You done me wrong, but keep on doing it 'til you do it right!

"I've Been Flushed From the Bathroom of your Heart"

"How Can I Miss You When You Won't Go Away?"

"She Got The Gold Mine and I Got The Shaft"

-And the **ads** for finding the person of your dreams. Oh my goodness! In fact, just about **any** ad—whether it's for shaving cream—both men's and women's—or cars, breath freshener, deodorant, hair stuff—imply that if you use if you use their stuff—it will bring you love! Buy their cars, chew their gum and serve their vodka—and you'll have more excitement than you can handle! **Is it true—any of it?**

- a. Now, love is a good thing, right? God is the Creator of love—and I'd have to say that it's one of His best gifts. The word primarily used in the Bible for love, as you may know, is **agape**—the root word for agony. This love is unconditional love. It's a **choice** to love—not something you fall into. This kind of love gets expressed through patient and kindness and faithfulness; it's not primarily something you **get** from someone else; it's something you **give** to them—even if they're your enemy.

-What most of the songs in our culture are talking about is infatuation. You could describe it as **love drugs**—which would actually be true. Your body is saturated with chemicals—and it creates this feeling of giddiness. Being weak in the knees. I'm sure you get the picture.

-But it this is **all** part of God's gift to us. When the love drugs tame down, the love we crave is the sense of being accepted by someone else just as we are. Being cherished. Thought about. Dreamed about. And love--**in all of its expressions**—has been created by God—and is **very** important to Him. So...**what's the problem?**

-Remember the context? Idolatry. Idolatry is when something else, usually one of God's good gifts—like love—takes the place that only He should have in our lives. An idol is something in which we place our trust to bring us happiness; to

help us solve our problems, meet our needs, and make us feel secure. It's something that becomes the driving force in our lives. When it comes to our idols—whether it's money, power, success or love, we are obsessive about it. If we're going to make sacrifices—our compromises, that's where we make them.

- b. Love is powerful! Noble! Life-giving! But when we put it first, it has the potential to put a barrier between us and God—and wreck our lives. So this morning, I want to talk very candidly about the **Idol of Love**—and the forms it can take in our hearts.

2. So, where does the Bible actually talk about the Love idol? If you know some of the stories, you might think it would be the story of Sampson and Delilah. Sampson was probably the strongest man who ever lived—but when it came to women, he was a sucker—and it cost him his life! There's actually a story tucked away in some ground we've already covered that's less obvious—but more descriptive. And this one ends well. Would you like to hear it? It's the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. In his book, **Counterfeit Gods**, Tim Keller brings this story to light in a way that I've **never** seen before—so I'm leaning heavily on his insight.

-At the surface level, the story of Jacob and Rachel looks like a **very** romantic story about a lonely guy who met a beautiful shepherdess at a well. In a show of manly strength, he takes the stone off the well so she can water the sheep, meets her Dad, and works for him. He's only a month in when he's so deeply in love with this girl, Rachel, that he agrees to work **seven** years for her hand in marriage. He does—and they live happily ever after. **The End!**

-But there's a back story. The broken part of Jacob's life—and we all have brokenness—is that he had **never** had his Dad's blessing. In a scam to get take it, he hurts his Dad, enrages his brother and has to run for his life. He's 40, he has no money, no home, no family—and a hole in his heart the size of Ontario. And into that need steps Rachel. Jacob doesn't just **love** Rachel. She's his Savior. She's **the ONE** who is going to make his miserable life—un-miserable. Anyone can wait seven years for that, right?

-His conversation with Laban, Rachel's Dad, **after** that seven years is quite revealing.

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." (Genesis 29:21 TNIV)

In the original language of the text, what Jacob says is **very** crude and bald: Basically, "I've done my time, so give me Rachel so I can have sex with her!" If some guy said that to me about one of my daughters...? Let's put it this way—I'm a pretty good shot!

- a. What happens next has to be legendary in the world of sting operations. Rebekah, Jacob's Mom, Laban's sister was the mastermind behind Jacob's sting operation with his Dad. Remember? He pretended to be his brother Esau, and stole the blessing. Well, Laban makes that scheme look **shabby**. He holds this huge wedding feast—then brings his heavily veiled daughter to Jacob—who's had too much wine. They consummate the marriage. And **then:**

When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" (Genesis 29:25 TNIV)

-Well, Jacob is **furious!** His only consolation is that he has to wait a week—then he can have Rachel on the first **buy now, pay later** plan recorded in all of history. And **that** is how Jacob's lifelong relationship with Leah starts. Imagine **that** dynamic on your honeymoon!

4. Imagine being Leah—with a husband not just in love with—but **addicted** to your sister, Rachel? The narrative is very succinct in it's comments about these two sisters, but when you read it, you get the point:

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel... (Genesis 29:16-18a TNIV)

-When this says that Leah had weak eyes, it wasn't saying, "But Rachel had great eyesight!" It's pretty clear; Rachel was drop-dead gorgeous—and Leah was particularly unattractive. The worship of physical beauty has been around for a **long** time. And Leah had spent her **entire life** living in the shadow of a beautiful sister. Laban doesn't think he'll get a good bride-price for her—and Jacob's gullibility and obsession with Rachel makes him the perfect solution to the **Leah problem**.

-Now, I want you to think of Leah—and the empty, broken place this created in her heart. She simply moved from being the daughter her father didn't want—to being the wife her new husband, Jacob, didn't want. Laban unloads her off the payroll as a kind of package deal. Now an unblessed, unwanted son—who lived in the shadow of his brother was married to an unblessed, unloved daughter who lived—**and continued to live**—in the shadow of her sister, Rachel. You know, the one Jacob was obsessed with.

- Listen to the **pain** in this brief record of Leah's first few years of marriage:

When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the LORD." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. (Genesis 29:31-35 TNIV)

- a. Do see how screwed up the thinking is in this marriage? Jacob married, thinking, "If only I could have Rachel—my unblessed, miserable life would be fixed. Now Leah's response to being unwanted is, "If I could only have babies,

then Jacob would love me—and my miserable, unblessed life would be fixed.” Look at what her first three son’s names are: ***Surely my husband will love me now; God knows I’m unloved; Now my husband will become attached to me.***

-But then, ***suddenly***, there’s this subtle, but profound shift in this downward spiral of misery she’s on. Judah is born, and look at the meaning of his name: ***This time I will praise the LORD.*** It’s like she says, “Putting all my hopes and dreams on Jacob’s love and attention is a dead end street. ***Now*** I’m going to look to the ***only*** One big enough to solve my problem with emptiness. The ***God*** of Abraham and Isaac, not the ***son*** of Abraham and Isaac!” Leah is the ***one*** person in this tragic story to have a spiritual breakthrough. And she gets her ***life*** back!

- b. It was at this specific juncture that God intervened. At the end of his life, Jacob would prophesy that ***Judah***—this break-through son--would be the one through whom the Deliverer—the One who would bless the nations—would come. Interesting, isn’t it? God had come to the girl that nobody wanted, the unloved one, and made her the ancestral mother of Jesus—God in flesh.

-You have to understand that the Bible isn’t a string of unrelated stories with a moral. There is one story—from Genesis to Revelation—about a God who saves and renews. He sees a woman who is unloved—and ***He*** loves her. And we see His heart; the husband to the husbandless; the father to the fatherless. He loves everyone—the wanted—and the unwanted; the loved—and the unloved.

-The pattern of our world has been the same for ***thousands*** of years; that the beautiful, the talented, the people who are ***special, smart, gifted, well-spoken*** get the good things. And the rest? Well, too bad—cause it’s the survival of the fittest! But God doesn’t judge by the outer quarter inch of our bodies, faces, personalities or brains. ***He*** looks at the heart. And ***He*** knows how to fill the empty hearts of people who feel unloved; whose hearts are like this gaping, bottomless pit that just can’t be filled.

5. As you read this story, do you understand how far off course we are in our world—and why we are vulnerable to making an idol of love? We all have an emptiness inside; this gnawing feeling—this craving—for the unconditional love and attention of another person. If we’ve experienced some wounded-ness in growing up with a parent who didn’t bless us, tell us that they were proud of us, that we were pretty or desirable or worth the attention and time it took to raise us—that increases the size of the empty spot in our hearts.

-Friends, please ***hear*** me on this: We ***all*** have that craving—and there is not a person on this planet who can fill that emptiness. Only the unconditional, unlimited love of God can. Everyone else is inadequate—and will disappoint you. And your pain—and addiction—and frustration will continue.

-That is a **God-sized** need, and if you place the obligation on another person to fill it—you will **crush** them with it. There's not a person on this planet—no matter **how** perfect they are that can fill that emptiness and stop the craving.

-What sometimes happens is that a person with a deep need in their hearts hooks up with someone they think will meet it. And their obsession feels like **love**—but it's actually more like an addiction. They hold on tight—not necessarily because they are so deeply in love, but because they are so deeply in **need!** They're drowning—and you're the life preserver! And **you can't preserve their life, fill their heart with hope, or save their soul!**

a. Let me tell you why our culture with its obsession with love, sex and romance makes the problem worse. First, the level of brokenness in our culture is unprecedented. The pain is enhanced by our obsession with sexual attractiveness: **Looking good.** And, of course, if we fall into this trap, we are helpless before a fashion/beauty product industry. And **they** will define beauty for us as the right combination of hair, nails, eyelashes, pecks, biceps, abs and clothes. Oh, and **thinness.** Really important stuff, you know.

-Add to that the brokenness of families, distraction by busyness, expectations, pornography—and serial sexual encounters. And then promise that your emptiness can be filled by the love of someone else—because, **All you need is love...da, da, da, da, da.** What happens is that the quest for love gets selfish. We're not looking for someone to cherish, serve, and stay with through good times and bad; we're looking for someone to **meet our needs.** And that contradicts the very definition of love.

b. See, when you hook your dreams, plans, hopes, and rescue up to someone who **can't actually fulfill your dreams, plans or hopes**—or **rescue** you—you get disillusioned. Sometimes angry. With all due respect to Leah, there's a very pointed phrase in this story that addresses disillusionment in general—and the disillusionment of love in particular:

When morning came, there was Leah! (Genesis 29:25 TNIV)

Or, as it says in the older versions: **Behold, there was Leah!**

-I found out several years ago that on our honeymoon, I made some stupid comment to Lori that stuck like a barbed arrow in her heart—and *I don't even remember making it.* Lori thought she was marrying James Bond, Prince Charming: **When morning came, behold, there was Leah!**

-Ever heard someone say, "Finally, I've found someone who can fill the hole in my life!" When someone says And you know what will happen...**Behold, there was Leah.**

-This, friends, is part of the disillusionment of life! And it fits **every** idol we trust in. You think money will do it for you? That if you win the lottery, get the new home, the new car—relieve the financial pressure of your life—and **that will**

solve your problems? Just wait—because at ***some*** point, ***Behold, there was Leah!***

-You think success—the admiration and attention of others; becoming the star you'd always hoped you'd be; being recognized—whatever—***Behold—in the morning, there was Leah!*** People have Extreme Makeovers, win ***America's Biggest Loser***—and, ***behold, there was Leah***—just lighter, tighter, more jazzed up, a smoother ¼ inch exterior.

- c. I'm not being cynical, and I'm not slamming Leah—I'm just saying that ***this*** the reality of life. And it is ***especially*** the reality of love. Know what love and romance is all about? It's not about ***receiving*** love and attention for the rest of your life from an adoring fan who's addicted to you, worships the ground you walk on—and just can't live without you.

-That will ***crush*** you! Love and romance is about personal growth. It's about learning ***how*** to love—while you're hooked up with an imperfect person—a person with a past; a person with huge gaping flaws to practice on. And ***that's*** where we need the help of a God ***who is love—and who loves unconditionally***—a God who gives ***us*** power to love when we ***really don't feel like loving!***

-If you will let Him love you, He is the One—the ***only*** One—who can fill that massive, empty spot in your life. And in doing so, He will teach you how to love. How to love through disappointment and disillusionment. How to get past the pain of growing up unloved. How to move past the pain of living in someone else's shadow. How to love someone who's ability to express love in your language is awkward and stunted. And if you ***don't*** have His love, you may try to turn the lover in your life into a god who saves you and meets your needs. Let me say it again: ***No human being can carry that weight!***
-And it's His love that enables you to engage in God's mission to love and redeem and remake this world—rather than going through life looking for someone to love, redeem and remake you. And being filled with His love will help you to survive that pain of rejection—because you're life isn't ***ON...or OVER*** depending on your latest squeeze.

- d. There's a song that illustrates the love idol as well as any other one. I've used it before. It was the #1 song in 1977, the year Lori and I got married. ***You Light Up My Life*** by Debbie Boone. Anyone remember the words"?

So many nights I sit by my window waiting for someone to sing me his song. So many dreams I kept deep inside me alone in the dark but now you've come along.

You light up my life. You give me hope to carry on--you light up my days and fill my nights with song. It can't be wrong when it feels so right. 'Cause You...you light up my life.

The philosophy behind this song is a set-up for disillusionment. But the last words are ***dangerous! It can't be wrong, when it feels so right.*** I've heard

that phrase used to defend an amazing array of stupid decisions over the years. And it **always** means trouble. It means that someone is about to offer a sacrifice to the idol of love. And, friends, there is **no one** worth sacrificing your character and your faith for.

6. But it's not just romantic love that becomes an idol. There are others—and I just want to mention two more. This is hard to talk about in a culture like ours, but it's possible for us to turn our love for our children into an idol. Now, before you get a nosebleed—hear me out. It's possible to make them the center out of our lives—and make all our sacrifices to them—for the sense of joy and fulfillment it gives **us** when **they** do well. When push comes to shove—**they** come first—not God.

-The reason most of us react to the thought of our love for our children being an idol is that everyone who has children thinks, "**Man, I'd give my life to make them happy and successful!**" Our love for our children is a god-given instinct. Remember, just about every idol is one of God's good gifts—that becomes **god**. God calls spouses to **love** each other. God calls parents to **love** their children. But if we put them first—before God—it can destroy them—and destroy us.

-There is a tragic story at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel about the high priest of Israel, Eli. Eli, in his own right, was a good man. Listen to what the Bible says about these guys:

**Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD
(1 Samuel 2:12 TNIV)**

-It was **so** bad—and Eli was **so** blind to it, God gave Samuel a message for Eli, when he was quite young, that scared him half to death. It was about these two corrupt sons who worked next to him in the temple. They were wicked selfish guys who bullied the people who brought sacrifices and slept with the women who came to serve. Eli's approach had been, **Now, now boys...the reports I'm hearing are not good!** God's rebuke to him was,

Why do you honour your sons more than me...(1 Samuel 2:29b TNIV)

-Eli's two sons died in battle—trying to use the ark, the symbol of the presence of God—as a form of magic to help them win. When Eli heard about this, he fell over dead—and the mantle of the priesthood was ripped away from his whole family.

Everyone lost!

-In his book, **Counterfeit Gods**, Tim Keller tells the story of woman he knew who fell into this trap. For a number of years, she wasn't sure if she could have children—and then she and her husband were blessed with two great kids. She became what our generation calls a **helicopter parent**—hovering over our children—and then swooping in to solve their problems before they feel them. Keller says, "Her overpowering drive to give her children a perfect life made it impossible for her to actually enjoy them. Her over-protectiveness, fears and anxieties, and her need to control every detail of her children's lives made the family miserable."

-He says later, It's not so much that she loved her children too much, but rather that she loved God too little in relationship to them, and that her desire for her children to be successful and happy was actually selfish and really about **her** need to feel worthwhile and valuable."

-This is a **huge** deal in our culture, isn't it? God's call on us, His people, is to put Him first in every part of our lives. When we put our children first, it insults God—and everyone gets hurt. And when we put our children on that kind of pedestal, it hurts them. **No human being can bear the weight of another human being's attempt to find their meaning and hope in them. It's just too much!** And in with a soul made to put **God** first, **we** get hurt, too. We make our souls vulnerable in **any** situation where God is not God—something or someone else is.

7. There's one more area where love gets off-track and turned into an idol. It's when our friends and their values come first—and have the power to neutralize our value system. We are probably most vulnerable to this when we are in our early to mid teens. At that stage, parents are...well, just **parents—goofy, demanding, weird.** God is?—well, we're still figuring that out. And **friends?** Everything! Being with them, texting them, talking to them, hanging with them, being approved by them—is our world. Their approval—or disapproval can make our day or make us want to cut our throats.

-This is a phase most of us go through, right? But we probably never grow out of it as much as we think we do. This need for the approval of our friends continues into college, university, jobs, where we live—and our **lifestyle** isn't so much about what's good for us, what's true and right in our soul—or even our value system. It's what **they** think. About life. About sex. About God. About right and wrong. About what matters and what doesn't.

-And when our friends take on this kind of profile in our lives, **they** are where we make our sacrifices. I'll bet some of you have monthly cell-phone bills that are larger than your car payment—and are actually approaching what you pay in rent!

-God **does** call us to relational intelligence—to understand how friendship works; to help our friends, to **be** a good friend. Jesus said,

**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.
(John 15:13 TNIV)**

Friends—true friends, loyal friends, close friends—are truly one of God's **best** gifts. But they're gifts—not god. I can guarantee you that **they** don't want to be the place where you worship—where you look to find your sense of worth—for approval of what you do or don't do. They don't want to carry the weight of our belief system and values—even if they pressure you do conform! No friendship can stand pressure of being the ultimate thing in your life!

-We put love on a pedestal; God put love on a cross—as an act of sacrifice so His love could reach the world! Friends—it's **His** love, **His** friendship, **His** hope that makes life worth living. And it's **His** power to love—that gives our love power—and meaning.

8. I was out running a couple of weeks ago and saw a man using one of these things—a weed-puller—in his front yard. They're cool, because you can pull dandelions without bending over! I made some sort of comment about him saving his back muscles, and he said, "Oh, this is just cosmetic. Unless you get the roots, the weeds just grow back!"

-I thought about that as I kept running. What occurred to me is that we can knock the tops off of our idols—clean up our lives—but when push comes to shove, we're right back at it—looking to prosperity, success, power or love to bring our lives meaning and solve our problems. Idols can't just be removed—they have to be replaced. And the only replacement is God Himself.

-Repentance *isn't* just about feeling bad and guilty about trying to meet our needs with things that can *never* meet them. It's the life-long process of identifying our false worship—whether it's money, power, a boyfriend—or even church—and replacing that junk with the One who went to a cross so we could be free.

-A good question to ask this morning—especially at communion—is: Where *is* my worship going? Like, what is it in my life that I am putting before God? Where am I most likely to make my sacrifices—even when it comes to my character? But the bottom line is—**Will you turn away from it?** Will you recognize that you are pursuing a false God that will lead you astray—and *deeply* disappoint you and hurt you? God will not settle for being a close second in our lives. Not even when it comes to love.