

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

June 6, 2010

## THE IDOL OF PROSPERITY

### Exodus 32

1. How many of you were at the first gathering we had in this building in January, 2005 - **before** we started the renovation? If you will remember, a bunch of news teams showed up—and it was talked about in newspapers all the way down to Florida. We also heard—but could never prove, that David Letterman made a comment about it. After all, how often does worship take place in a strip club?

-Actually, to ask that question—**‘how often does worship take place in a strip club’**- would be the same as asking ‘how often does worship take place at a stadium. It depends on **what** you’re worshipping, wouldn’t it? There are rows of big steel and glass buildings in the GTA where, tomorrow, thousands of people will take their place at desks or cubicles. And **that’s** where they’ll find their identity and worth—and offer their sacrifices.

-Right across Hwy. 48 from here is another building—representing many others--with a huge, locking vault—where they keep money. And for some people, that vault represents how safe and security they really are. That’s where they make their regular sacrifice; they come weekly—or visit it electronically on a regular basis—and come bearing gifts.

-There’s another place of worship not far from here—with walls covered with mirrors—and with priests and priestesses dressed in spandex and leotards. In January, this place of worship is jammed, and then attendance takes a huge dip for another 11 months. Multiple sacrifices are made to please that god—the god of appearance. And to this god, worshippers make offerings of perspiration and pain—and salad!

-My point is that people worship **all over the place!** Malls, stadiums, strip clubs, universities—even TV studios! In fact, the single most popular TV program in US history is...**American Idol!** We are a **worshipping** people--**all** of us—making sacrifices where we hope to find our worth, along with a blessed life.

2. The over-arching story of the Bible is that we were made to worship God and find our worth in Him. But even since sin corrupted life, people have pretty much worshipped—and placed highest worth on anything **but** God. And that’s what idolatry is.

-And that’s why the very first two commandments in the Bible deal with it. “You must not have any other god but me” and “Do not make and worship an image of anything in Heaven or on earth.” Before Moses had even made it off the mountain, the Israelites had already blown them out of the water. Let’s read the account:

**When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. “Come on,” they said, “make us some gods who can lead us. We don’t know what happened to this fellow Moses, who**

brought us here from the land of Egypt.” So Aaron said, “Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me.” All the people took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, “O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:1-4 NLT)

- a. Now, this seems **very** strange to us. We think, “Why would they think a gold calf had freed them from slavery?” First, it’s important to know that these people didn’t see this calf **as** God—but simply in a representative way. Like we would view a cross at the front of a church—or communion.

-Something else. What they did came as naturally as moshing would come to some of you metal heads at a concert—or as naturally as screaming and cheering would come to some of you sports fans—at a stadium when your favorite team wins. ***This was a cultural thing that they had seen and experienced all of their lives.***

- b. What motivated this whole thing is something we can related to. ***Impatience.*** Moses was on the mountain; they got restless—impatient—and the idol was right there on a shelf in their hearts. It was handy. It was familiar. And it was ***there!***

-Our tendency is to think, “But we ***know*** better now! I mean, because we’re modern people, we could probably take the first two commandments about idols out of the ***Big Ten.***” In his book, ***Counterfeit Gods***, the author, Tim Keller has an amazing quote from a couple of biblical scholars who say that the central principle of the Bible is the ***rejection of idolatry.***

-And the truth about us—about our culture—is that idolatry is as much a part of life as it has ever been in the history of the world. It’s just that the rival gods have gotten sneaky. Oh, they’re there—they’re just hidden.

-What you find as you continue to read through the Old Testament is that people would come to the temple and go through their usual routine. But the gods they ***really*** trusted in were the idols hidden in their homes. See, the ***true God*** calls for a change of heart. He asks for our obedience and devotion. He contradicts us; tells us we’re wrong. Calls us on our motives. And He can’t be coerced or manipulated. And we get impatient. Restless. Anxious.

3. Any basic study of the Bible brings up an idol called ***Baal.*** ***Baal*** actually means, “master” or “lord”. People in that culture believed that ***Baal*** actually ruled over the weather—and brought everything necessary for good crops.

-Another god mentioned a lot is Ashtoreth. She was worshipped as a mother goddess—Baal’s mistress. And to promote fertility, temple prostitution was a very common way of worshipping her. So, in a culture very dependent on the fertility of fields and animals—you can see the pull of worship—of having ***good luck.*** Worship of this type was like going to bank in ours—just part of everyday life.

- a. If you want to get down to the core of idol worship—it was about using manipulation to get what you want from the unseen forces and powers of the earth. For the Israelites—when the rain didn't come, when the cows weren't calving—they got **impatient**. And they would revert right back to the ways of their culture.
- b. We don't typically have problems with big statues, incense, and fertility rites. As God said through one of His prophets, **These men have set up idols in their hearts**. John Calvin—a great theologian of yesteryear said, **The human heart is an idol factory**. Idolatry isn't about statues, really; it's when I place my trust in something else but God. It's when anything else in my life takes the place that **only** belongs to God. It's when I look to something that doesn't have God's power—to give me what **only** God has the power and authority to give me.

-For me, for you--idolatry is taking one of God's good gifts—money, work, power—and even love—and then turning it into something that we give our **ultimate** devotion. Instead of God—and what He says and the way He leads being of **ultimate** worth—the counterfeit gets our **worth**-ship.

-My point in this series is not to ask **if** we ever struggle with idols. The question is **which idol is God's greatest rival in my life?** We've all got them.

- c. Maybe first, we should just name what some of these counterfeit gods are.
- \***Money/prosperity**. How many of you think this could be a problem?
  - \***Success/image?** This always wants to be god, right?
  - \***Being smart**—Ever hear anyone brag about their education? Or how much they know?
  - \***Attractiveness**. I actually saw an ad calling for this!
  - \***Relationships**. Getting a man; having a woman. Huge!
  - \***Pleasure**. The next romp, the next weekend, the next party, the next adrenaline rush.
  - \***Church**. Having a reputation as a spiritual, or self-giving or knowledgeable person can become a god!
  - \***Work**. What do you think? Any idol worship here? **\*And there are more...**these are just the most obvious.

4. There are some great questions that will give at least **some** indication of whether or not something is an idol in your life.
- \*Eg., which of these do you find yourself **thinking about the most?** See, idols are usually the things we dream about.
  - \*Or, which of these do you **fear losing the most?**
  - \*Which of these things most gives you a **sense of identity**—makes you feel important; worth knowing?
  - \*Which of these do you most **look to for security?**
  - \*Which of these do you most want **to be known for?**
  - \*Which of these causes the **highest highs when it's going good—and lowest lows when it's not?**
  - \***What would the people who know me best say** is my most likely idol?

\*And, finally, which of these things does **most of my effort tend to revolve around?** What do I sacrifice most for?

-The Bible says that God is a **jealous God**. That sounds strange to us—but I'll be you can identify. What you feel in inside when you see a close friend falling for a scam that could cost them everything? What do you feel when you see your 15 year old daughter getting reeled in by a guy you know just wants her body? How would you feel if you saw a pedophile luring your child into their car with gifts? Those are some identification points with what **God** feels. God's intense love for us and what we can be and what we can do as His people makes Him **hate** the alternatives we fall for that leave us empty, raped and dumped. And **that's** why we need to have our radar tuned to this trash.

5. Question; in your opinion, what do you think is the most worshipped counterfeit god Canada? My guess is—prosperity. Money. Another question: What do you think is the most worshipped counterfeit god in the world? Let me give you a hint. The Bible says probably 20X more about money and prosperity than it does about sex...or prayer.

-Here's another question. How does the Bible view prosperity? The answer is--it depends! You may be surprised to know that wealth in itself—making money—is seen as a good thing. You see this particularly in the Old Testament—where wealth is seen as a good gift from God.

-In fact, the Judeo-Christian worldview is more positive about the material world than any of the other great religions. In Buddhism and Hinduism, the world is actually seen as an illusion. Islam teaches that our future is going to be in an immaterial world. In the Greek/Roman world of Jesus' day, creation was seen as **bad**—and the spirit as **good**. But according to the Bible, the world as we know it now will be made new—and our bodies will be like Jesus' resurrected body. We will eat and drink. The Bible teaches that **creation** is good—material things are good; it's **sin** that has corrupted what God created as good.

-Please understand this; the Bible gives **no** support to the idea that material deprivation is good or noble. Being poor—not having enough is **not** more noble than having plenty. That's why our taste buds, our appreciation for beauty, the ability to experience intense pleasure **all** come from God. Because these things **are** good, we are called to make sure that those who are poor, deprived and isolated have them. Our calling as His followers is to wholeheartedly join God in sharing what He's blessed us with. Prosperity is a **good** thing.

-Now--**here's the other side to that** that keeps me off of the **health and wealth Gospel** tour bus. Money and prosperity has **incredible** power to corrupt. Unequaled, really. Coming into a pile of money, or making a deal that nets you 10X more than you've ever had creates a rush that is addictive. There is a **negative spiritual energy** to money. Someone put it like this; **The trouble with money is that it makes you do things you don't want to do.**

- a. When you look at the Israelites—and the kind of community God wanted to create through them, the **bottom line issue** that got them off course **wasn't**

sincerely believing that other gods offered more. It was exactly what you see in the story of Aaron; impatience. **I want it—and I want it now!**

-God had made a covenant with them where He came first. It involved the realization that **everything** came from Him. It involved the acknowledgement—that because it came from Him, He had the right to tell them how to use His good gifts in a way that blessed them—**and** others. That involved generosity and extreme compassion—where the wealthy left food behind in their fields in orchards. Where everyone took a break once a week—and a year long break every seven. Every 50 years, all the land went back to it's original owners and every servant was freed. That meant that there wouldn't be **generations** of poverty. **Greed** broke that

-Greed—worshipping the counterfeit gods—twisted justice, compassion, and fairness in favor of the powerful and the rich—and the counterfeit gods they served. And you **can** find a god to worship that will fit the bottom line in your life, whether it's success, power or money.

- b. When you see this, Jesus relentless teaching on greed—and masking it with religious observance—make sense.

-Remember the story about Jesus meeting a young wealth leader? He tells Jesus, "You know—I'm keeping all the commandments—but something's missing and I'm not sure what it is?" The narrative tells us that Jesus looked at him—and **loved** him—but then tells him to do something he never asked anyone else to do. Two things, really. First, He tells him to sell **everything**—all his stuff. I think the rich guy would've been okay if He'd stopped there. It was the second **ask** that got him; give the money to the poor—then come and follow Him.

-Why? Jesus is pointing out that money has a guy with **so** much potential—to be **totally** blind to the fact that he's cut the first command right out of his scroll! Money was the idol he had set up in his heart—and you know it's true because when God asked him to give it away—his heart couldn't take it. And he **walked away!**

- c. Jesus talks about money in a way He doesn't talk about anything else. Let me read what He says:

**"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Matthew 6:24 TNIV)**

-In the original text he actually uses the name of an Egyptian god, **Mammon**—to make it clear that money can become a false god. He says, "You will have to make a **conscious decision** as to whether you're going to serve the **real** God of the universe—or whether you will serve the most worshipped counterfeit replacement—**Mammon/prosperity/money.**

-Money has such a **negative spiritual power** that if you're making it and using it, you will have to put some kind of lead wall around it. If you don't, over time it can make you into someone **you really don't want to be**. It has that kind of power!

-Think about it like this. In the beginning, as humans, we were given a garden to tend. It belonged to **God**—it was **His wealth**—we were just the brokers. The real sin--what makes money toxic—is taking the money entrusted to us—and thinking of it as **ours**. And we think that way, don't we? **This money is mine**—and sometimes even when we give it, it has little threads attached—so we can **still** control it!

-Just so we're clear—Who does **all** prosperity and **all** money belong to! Not me—**God**. And if it truly belongs to God—that means that there are multiple bottom lines in how it's **made** and how it's **used**. Money is **not** the bottom line—but I'll tell you—if it's the secret idol in your heart, it will be. That's what it will demand of you. Money/prosperity will be what makes you feel significant and important. It will determine where you live, what you want for your family, where you eat, where you vacation—and who your friends are—and who you compare yourself to. Let me tell you what it can do:

**\*It can cause you to stay in a job that makes money but doesn't grow you or help anyone else.** Tim Keller tells the story of a guy who has having a conversation with a manager from MTV—who wouldn't let his own teenage daughters watch it? He said to this manager, "Doesn't that seem inconsistent?" And the manager's reply was, "Well, business is business."

**\*If money becomes an idol, you will overwork.** God told this community that was to represent Him and bless the nations to deliberately diminish their profit margin for the sake of their health, the health of the land—and the welfare of the poor. They didn't—and it **destroyed** them—and totally blew off God's mission.

**\*If money is the bottom line in your life it will take your highs into overdrive—where you become exuberant and over-confident.** It's a fact; people who have a lot of money tend to think they're good and knowledgeable in way more areas than they are. But when they **lose** their money, they want to cut their own throats. If you doubt me—look at some of the stats from the economic downturn in 2008-2009.

\*If money/prosperity dominates your life, you will tend to compartmentalize your business life—the money you see as yours—from the rest of your life. And you will become a hypocrite—pretending that God is God in all areas of life—when He's not—because **business is business**.

6. One of the phrases used around money is, **Money Talks**. Someone wrote, years ago, **Money talks, I'll not deny. I heard it once. It said, "Goodbye!"** What if money **could** actually talk to us? I'm convinced that the spiritual power **behind** money is the chatters non-stop. And it insists on being heard by those who **have** money—and

those who **don't**. What do you think it would say if it were unredeemed—and trying to be a counterfeit god in our lives?

- a. Well, I think it would say, **Compare yourself only with people who have more than you!** Apparently, a professor from MIT surveyed Olympic medalists on their happiness quotient. Guess who came in first? Gold, of course. Guess who came in second when it came to happiness? Strangely enough—it was the bronze winners. It was because **they** thought, “Wow! I almost didn’t get **any** medal! The winners of silver were thinking, “I **almost** won the gold! If I had only....!”

-And that’s the constant temptation—no matter where you’re at—to think, “Wow! If I only had what **they** had!” I once heard a speaker talking about a friend who gave him a ride in a multi-million dollar Leer jet he owned. Guess what he talked about? The **really** nice **multi-multi**-million dollar Leer jet a friend had gotten.

- b. If money could talk you into bowing to it, it would also say, **You don't really have a greed problem!** Over the past 30 years, people have come to me with all kinds of problems. I’ve never had **one** say, “Ken, you know—I think I’ve got a greed problem that’s affecting my soul—and could sabotage my life.” It’s because greed flies under the radar.

-One day when a guy interrupted a talk Jesus was giving over a family inheritance dispute, Jesus told a story about rich farmer God called a **fool** because he stockpiled his wealth—and was spiritually penniless. Jesus said,

**"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15 TNIV)**

-Did you ever notice that Jesus never told us to be on our guard against all kinds of adultery? No one ever thinks, halfway through the act, “Oh my goodness—I didn’t realize it, but I’m committing adultery!” Adultery is pretty obvious! Greed? Not so much so. Greed is deceptive and makes **us** deceptive.

- c. The third thing money would say—if it could talk—is **Worry about me! Be anxious! Grind yourself up. Don't just think out 3 days—think out 30 years!** Anyone here ever get anxious about money? Anyone who’s **never** been anxious about money?

-And of course, this anxiety **totally** contradicts everything Jesus said:

**"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. (Matthew 6:25 TNIV)**

-Know what the irony is in our lives? We live under the illusion that the solution to worrying about money—is **having** more money! But we keep getting more money—and thinking more and more about money—and worrying more and more about money. More money does **not** bring relief. It’s a lie. And **that** betrays its source—the master of all liars. Satan.

- d. There's another lie that money will tell you to pull you away from God—and from **Who** all we have belongs to. To put it into words would sound something like this: **Giving is a good idea in theory, but it's a bad idea in practice.** -And that is a **direct** contradiction to what Jesus said—and what the entire Bible has to say. Remember, when we're quoting Jesus—we're not just quoting a wonderful prophet—this is the God who made—and **owns** everything. And He says; **He says:**

**It is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20:35 TNIV)**

-Speaking in general terms about giving—including forgiveness, Jesus said:

**Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:38 TNIV)**

- e. One final lie that money will whisper in your ear as a counterfeit god is, **Yes, giving is a good idea, but not today. You can't afford it today.** I was just reading this article in the Toronto Star called **Debt.** Canadians owe a cumulative 1.41 **trillion dollars** in personal debt.

-Debt is nothing new to us. The funny thing is—we barely think about using paychecks from the future to give ourselves what we want right now. We just flip out the card. Does it **then** make sense to tell ourselves, "You know, I actually am a generous person—and God comes first in my life—I can afford to mortgage **future** paychecks to give me what I want know--but I can't afford to give in obedience to God. That's **bizarre** thinking!

-Until the money god has been dethroned and strangled, it will **keep** lying to you—saying that having **more** money will make you more generous. That the only reason you're not giving more now is because things are tight. But **some** day you'll have more and can be generous **then.** And the **truth?** It would be more like, "My money is **mine**—and I would rather tell **God** to wait—than tell **me** to wait!"

- f. And that lie is stitched to the final lie. **There is such a thing as enough; you just don't have it yet. Just keep running after it, though, because someday you'll get there!** Does anyone here think that's true? Good—because it is a massive untruth!

-Listen to the opening line of Psalm 23 in the New Living Translation:

**The Lord is my Shepherd; I have all that I need! (Psalm 23:1 NLT)**

-What does it mean to say, **I have all that I need!** Well, it means saying, "Enough! I don't have to increase and expand my lifestyle **one more inch!**

7. Let me return to what I originally said. Prosperity and money is **not** evil. Idolatry is taking God's **good** gifts—and making them god. See, stuff—value, money,

possessions—all these were **Gods'** ideas, not ours! And God's plan is **not** for them to go away. When money and prosperity are **redeemed**—when Jesus Christ is Lord over our lives—and then Lord of these things as well? Man, a **lot** of good can happen! -See, I think if money were trying to push us toward God, it would say something like, **Hey, don't look to me for contentment—look to GOD!** But contentment takes work. For me? I've always loved boats. As I drive Brian to work each day, someone's selling a boat on 48 just north of Major Mac. But it's covered in white plastic—with what it is and how much it is written with a magic marker on the plastic. I break my neck trying to see it! I finally stopped—and I'm not interested.

And sometimes...sometimes I have to remind myself, "Ken, you've had a great boat given to you—which you use, religiously, about 3 weeks out of 52. So **breathe into the paper bag...!**

-It's interesting. Anyone ever heard the phrase from the Bible, **I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.** People use this phrase for all kinds of things. Running marathons. Raising kids. Making a monster financial deal. Becoming a celebrity. Dieting. Want to hear the real context for it?

**I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little, For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11b-13 NLT)**

-Contentment is a **secret** we learn—through the power of Christ. Finances? Stocks? Man, they're up and down like a toilet seat. If you hook your heart to them—you'll **never** be content. Contentment comes—but through the power of Christ. It's a **choice!**

- a. And based on everything Jesus said, I think if money was going to pull us toward God it would say, **You will like your life better if you give than if you don't.**

-Know why that's true? Because, you see, the greed factor in us will not just fade and die of starvation or neglect. You have to break its back. And the **only** way to break its back—and disable it is by **giving**. Not just a little tiny, manageable, painless bit—GIVING. Till it hurts. You have to remind yourself—and the greed factor in you, "What I have does **not** belong to me. It's been entrusted to me by God—and I will be held accountable for how I use it.

-And in a world like ours where we have way more than most? To whom much has been given—much is required! Mammon—the evil spiritual power behind money is a **horrible, selfish, hard-hearted, tight-fisted, bloodthirsty** god. If you follow it, do what it suggests—you will **not** like yourself at the end of your road. The Bible says—we **become like** what we serve.

-Money that's been redeemed for God's original purposes would say, "**I make an *amazing* servant! Really! But I make an ugly, relentless, horrible master!**"

- b. And I would plead with you—with all that's in me. Don't get sucked into worship by the counterfeits. Prosperity, money, possessions—are awesome gifts from a loving God—but they are ***not*** god. And if you serve them—they will break your heart and destroy your life.