Counterfeit Gods

Tim Keller

A Study Guide Prepared for Leroy Community Chapel
A Study Guide to Counterfeit Gods
By Timothy Keller

Counterfeit Gods is a book that examines the issue of idolatry throughout the Bible and our world today. It reveals and exposes how we each fall victim to the subtle temptations to take something that is good in itself and elevate it above all other things in the search for security and meaning, stunting our spiritual growth and development. This book will significantly help us identify our idols and get to the root of our sins, so that we can uproot them and worship God more fully.

This study walks through the book chapter by chapter, for a total of 8 weeks. This guide should be used as a help to think through the issues Keller raises in each chapter. After reading each chapter in the book grab your journal and work through the corresponding questions in the study guide. After reflecting and journaling on each question you should, (1) Talk to God about all your findings, and (2) Talk to a trusted friend about your findings. May God expose the idols of your heart so that the result is deep repentance and a freedom to live a life of true worship.

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[This study was adapted from Westminster Chapel’s study, London, U.K.]
Introduction to *Counterfeit Gods*

Read the Introduction to *Counterfeit Gods*.

Consider the questions below. These questions are intended to be a guide to provoke valuable gospel-centered thinking and then conversations, please consider each one thoughtfully.

Questions

1. After reading the introduction to *Counterfeit Gods*, what is your first impression of the book? What do you hope God will reveal to you as you read this book together?

2. What is an idol? Give some examples of good things in life that can become idols.

3. What idols do you currently struggle with?
   
   a. Idols capture our imagination, and we can locate them by looking at our daydreams. What do you daydream about? What do you enjoy imagining?

   b. Idols give us a sense of being in control, and we can locate them by looking at our nightmares. What do you fear the most?

   c. We can also locate idols by looking at our most unyielding emotions. What makes you uncontrollably angry, anxious, or despondent?

Prayer

Idols control us and can lead us to despair. The way forward is to discern the idols of our hearts and our culture, and turn back to the true God. The Living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the cross, is the only Lord who can truly fulfill you.

Spend time asking God to forgive you for the times you have desired some good things more than you ought. Ask him to reveal hidden idols in your heart.
All You’ve Ever Wanted

Read Chapter 1 of *Counterfeit Gods.*
Read Genesis 22 and Hebrews 11:17-19.

Questions

1. Why was God’s command to sacrifice Isaac even more extraordinary than it may at first appear in light of the culture of the day?

2. Abraham believed God was both holy and gracious. How do you think Abraham would have reacted to God’s command if he had strayed from this belief?

3. The call to sacrifice Isaac may be perceived as unloving and inconsiderate. How is God’s command actually merciful to Abraham?

4. Idols enslave. How may have Abraham’s idolatrous love for Isaac enslaved him if it had gone unchecked? What would have been the consequences for both Abraham and Isaac?

5. In what ways is the story of Abraham and Isaac a foreshadowing of the story of Jesus Christ?

6. Read Romans 8:31-39. How do Abraham and Isaac remind us of the Father’s love for us?

7. As long as Abraham never had to choose between his son and obedience to God he could not see that his love for Isaac was becoming idolatrous. Can you recall a time when you had to make a choice between God and another good thing? What was the outcome?

8. What are the two responses we can have when our ‘Isaacs’ are under threat?

Prayer

We must not make the mistake of thinking that this story means all we have to do is be *willing* to part with our idols rather than *actually* leave them behind. Like Abraham, Jesus struggled with God’s command on His life (Matthew 26:36-46). In the end He obeyed and walked up the mountain. We are to do likewise.

Spend some time asking the Holy Spirit to give you strength to walk up the mountain.
Love is Not All You Need

Read Chapter 2 of *Counterfeit Gods*. Read Genesis 29.

Questions

1. Identify the evidence in the passage that points to Jacob’s unhealthy obsession with Rachel.

2. What were the underlying reasons for Jacob’s obsession with Rachel?

3. What were the consequences of Jacob’s idolatry?

4. The other characters in this story are also dealing with some level of idolatry. What idols do Rachel, Leah and Laban serve?

5. Idolatry can lead you to “break any promise, rationalize any indiscretion, or betray any other allegiance in order to hold onto it”. How does this play out in the lives of the characters in this passage? In your own life?

6. Jacob ended up in severe disillusionment as a result of putting the weight of all his deepest hopes and longings on Rachel. List the four responses we can have to severe disappointment. What did you learn from this experience?

7. What is the main lesson we can learn from this story when we read it under the great biblical narrative, the redemption of all of creation through the person and work of Jesus Christ?

8. How does knowing the true Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, change you?

Prayer

The power to overcome idols is found in Jesus Christ alone. He says, “I am the true Bridegroom”. Christ came into the world, not through beautiful Rachel, but through the unwanted and unloved one. He took upon himself our sins and died in our place. If we are deeply moved by the sight of His love for us, it detaches our hearts from other would-be saviors. “The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.”

Thank God for sending His Son and pray for a fresh awakening in your heart to the beauty and worth of the gospel.
Money Changes Everything

Read Chapter 3 of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Questions

1. Why is greed especially hard to see in ourselves?

2. According to the Bible, and identified by Keller, what 3 things do idolaters do with their idols?

3. Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. Why was this action so significant in that culture? What can we learn about Zacchaeus’ desire to see Jesus by his willingness to climb the tree?

4. Zacchaeus wanted to follow Jesus, and immediately he realized that, if he was to do that, money was an issue. How do Zacchaeus’ generous actions give evidence for his understanding of grace?

5. What do you notice about Jesus’ response in verse 9?

6. Keller makes a distinction between deep and surface idols. What is this distinction? Give some examples of both deep and surface idols. Have you found yourselves worshiping any of these idols in recent months?

7. Give examples of how people use their money differently when they possess the deep idols of power, approval, comfort and control.

8. How does living a generous lifestyle demonstrate the gospel to others? In what ways are you challenged to be more generous?

Prayer

What breaks the power of money over us is not the redoubled effort to follow the example of Christ. Rather, it is deepening our understanding of the salvation of Christ, what we have in him, and then living out the changes that that understanding makes in our heart – the seat of our mind, will, and emotions.

Ask the Holy Spirit to expose areas of your life where you may be relying too heavily on wealth and money.
The Seduction of Success

Read Chapter 4 of Counterfeit Gods.
Read 2 Kings 5:1-5.

Questions

1. How does personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are god?

2. What are the possible signs in an individual's life that point to the fact that success is an idol?

3. What do you notice about how the author describes Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1?

4. Naaman expected to get his cure through letters of high recommendation from one king to another king through offering money. What can we learn from this in regards to Naaman's trust in his success?

5. What is the significance of the method of restoration and healing of Naaman?

6. How does this whole story highlight the availability of God's grace to everyone, no matter who you are?

7. Who in this story had to bear their suffering in order for Naaman to receive his blessing? How does this point to Jesus Christ?

8. According to Keller, what can be our usual reaction when we find ourselves at the bottom rung of the ladder? Share a time when you have reacted this way.

9. How does the example of the servant girl challenge you?

10. How can we break our heart's fixation on doing “some great things” in order to heal ourselves of our sense of inadequacy?

Prayer

The idol of success cannot be just expelled, it must be replaced. The human heart's desire for a particular valuable object may be conquered, but its need to have some such object is unconquerable. Only when we see what Jesus, our great Suffering Servant, has done for us will we finally understand why God's salvation does not require us to do “some great things”.

Confess your weakness and need of a savior. Thank Jesus for humbling himself.
The Power and the Glory

Read Chapter 5 of *Counterfeit Gods*.
Read Daniel 2.

Questions

1. Nebuchadnezzar was deeply troubled by the dream. Why?

2. Nebuchadnezzar is a classic case study of how an “insecure man seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power...He pretends he is not limited”. Human beings have very little real power over their lives. What sort of things in life are out of your control?

3. Power idols are deep idols that can express themselves through a great variety of other surface idols. Give examples of some of these surface idols.

4. How was this dream a call to humility?

5. Much of our addiction to power and control is due to false conceptions of God. How can a false perception of God allow us to think we are “masters of our fate”? 

6. More intervention by God was necessary in Nebuchadnezzar’s life. Read Daniel 4:24-27. For what reason did God make Nebuchadnezzar like an ox? Is God being gracious or cruel?

7. Read Jeremiah 18:1-6. How best are we to respond to the Potter when He chooses to remold, bend and squeeze us?

8. Share an experience when you were humbled by circumstances beyond your control. What were the consequences?

9. Nebuchadnezzar didn’t merely ponder God’s sovereignty, but rather, he praised the Almighty God. What does this tell us about the relationship between pride and worship?

Prayer

The normal response to our sense of powerlessness is to deny it, to find people we can dominate and control in order to live in that denial. But Jesus shows us another way. By giving up his power and serving, he became the most influential man who ever lived. Jesus is not only an example; however, he is a Savior.

Admit your need and powerlessness, and cast yourself on his mercy.
The Hidden Idols in Our Lives

Read Chapter 6 of *Counterfeit Gods.*
Read Jonah 1.

Questions

1. In what ways can idolatry function inside religious communities? What are the consequences of such idolatry?

2. In chapter 2, Jonah ran away from God’s call upon his life and instead went to Tarshish. What 3 idols in Jonah’s life caused him to run away?

3. How was God gracious to Jonah despite his disobedience?

4. Jonah prays to God from inside the big fish. What does Jonah finally realize? How had his idolatry blinded him to the grace of God?

5. In the past, have you ever ignored a call from God and gone in the other direction, like Jonah? What do you think caused this action?

6. Jonah realized and repented from idolatry in the belly of the fish yet they reasserted themselves in his life. What does this reveal to us about the human heart? Have you ever gone through the same experience as Jonah where idols continued to hold sway even after identification and attempted repentance?

7. Jonah shows us that it is one thing to believe the gospel with our minds, and another to work it deep into our hearts so it affects everything we think, feel and do. Under what circumstances in life is the true nature of our heart revealed?

8. Jonah was asked to leave his comfort zone and his safety, and to go in love to minister to a people who might harm him. In what ways does Jonah foreshadow Jesus Christ?

Prayer

Jonah ultimately obeyed God and responded to his grace. God is now pointing the question to us: “will you follow me?” Are we like Jonah willing to change? If we are, then we must look to the Ultimate Jonah, and to his sign, his death and resurrection.

Ask him to continue to reveal hidden idols in your heart.
The End of Counterfeit Gods & Epilogue

Read Chapter 7 and the Epilogue of *Counterfeit Gods*. Read Genesis 32 and Romans 1.

**Questions**

1. Why did Jacob steal Esau’s blessing in Genesis 27?

2. What did Jacob finally realize as he wrestled with the mysterious character in Genesis 32?

3. Jacob held onto God while they wrestled, at the risk of his life, in order to gain blessing for himself. How does this differ from Christ holding on in obedience at the cross?

4. The Spirit will make God’s love and blessing an experiential reality in your heart. Sometimes, like Jacob, we must experience crippling weakness in order for us to discover this blessing. Has this ever happened to you?

   [Epilogue]

5. According to Romans 1, what is the one thing that causes us to sin?

6. The secret to change is to identify and dismantle the counterfeit gods of our hearts. What are the four key ways Keller suggests to discern our hearts’ true love?

7. What will happen if you uproot the idol but fail to plant the love of Christ in its place?

8. What happens to us when we rejoice over God’s sacrificial, suffering love for us?

9. Gospel truths must shape all we feel and do in order to protect us from idolatry. How do we put this into action? Give some examples of spiritual disciplines.

**Prayer**

When we realize the difference between setting our hearts on Christ rather than obeying rules of outward conduct, we are on the road to freedom from the counterfeit gods that control us.

Spend some time rejoicing in Christ and repenting over sin. These go together!