



Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.
by Don Hooton

Lesson 8 | SINS of IDOLATRY: *idolatry, sorcery* May 3, 2023

Continuing along with the list of “works of the flesh” that we are **commanded** to crucify. Surely we can do this because Paul said Christians *have crucified the flesh* (Galatians 5:24). In Romans 6:6, he said, “*knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.*” Further, in Colossians 3:5, he said, “*Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion....*” In Ephesians 4, Paul wrote, “*But that is not how you came to know Christ, assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires...*”

There are two possible ways of life set forth in the last portion of Galatians 5. The one is lived in the flesh (with its wicked deeds manifested in verses 19-21). The other brings forth the fruit of the Spirit (producing the beautiful Christian characteristics described in verses 22-23).

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, 20 **idolatry, sorcery**, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The “works of the flesh” include a second category which we have labeled sins of idolatry. These include one evil called “idolatry” and another called “witchcraft” [sorcery].

As we continue our study of the “works of the flesh”, William Barclay makes an insightful comment worthy of consideration. Each one of these sins perverts something which in itself is good: “*The awfulness of the power of sin lies precisely in its ability to take the raw material of potential goodness and turn it into the material of evil*” (Barclay):

1. Fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness twists the sexual instinct which is in itself a beautiful thing and a part of true love between a man and a woman.
2. Idolatry twists worship.
3. Sorcery twists the proper use of drugs.
4. Hatred, contentions, jealousies twists the noble ambition and desire to do well which can spur one to greatness.
5. Outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions twists righteous indignation into a passion where the zeal for goodness cannot exist.
6. Dissensions, heresies, envy twists the devotion to principle which can produce the martyr.
7. Drunkenness, revelries twists the happy joy of social fellowship.

The first in this section is IDOLATRY which is simply the act of giving something other than the true and living God the principal place in our worship, adoration and affections. The Bible is quite unambiguous about what God thinks of it. “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” (Exodus 19:3-4); “Do not turn to worthless idols or make cast images of gods for yourselves; I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:4). In fact, even in the New Testament will we find equally strong objections to them in the lives of Christians. “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1Corinthians 10:14); “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1John 5:21).

Even in the prophets we read: “All who make idols are nothing, and what they treasure benefits no one. Their witnesses do not see or know anything, so they will be put to shame... Look, all its worshipers will be put to shame, and the craftsmen are humans. They all will assemble and stand; they all will be startled and



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put to shame... A person can use it for fuel. He takes some of it and warms himself; also he kindles a fire and bakes bread; he even makes it into a god and worships it; he makes an idol from it and bows down to it... He makes a god or his idol with the rest of it. He bows down to it and worships; he prays to it, "Save me, for you are my god..." (Isaiah 44:9-19).

18 Such people do not comprehend

The second in this section is SORCERY (CSV, or witchcraft in other versions). Likewise, it is condemned all throughout Scripture. Notice Leviticus 19:31, for instance, which condemns consulting mediums: "Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God." A few verses later, God adds, "And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people" (Leviticus 20:6). See also Deuteronomy 18:9-14, which names practitioners of witchcraft, soothsayers, interpreters of omens, sorcerers, conjurors, mediums, spiritists, necromancers, and diviners as abominations to the Lord.

The New Testament censured this just as the Old. However, what appears in the New Testament—except this list as a work of the flesh—the writers recount how Jesus and the Apostles battled it. For instance, on the island of Paphos, Paul stood against Elymas the sorcerer, really a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus, saying, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10). In Acts 16:16-18, a slave girl diviner, who followed Paul around for many days, was in fact possessed by a demon, "a spirit of divination." Revelation states plainly that sorcerers will be cast into the Lake of Fire (21:8; see also 22:15). These actions alone suggest that God considers all forms of occultism to be a moral outrage.

Most people in Western cultures like ours, do not worship gods graven into wood and stone, but it is easy for us to set our affections that become idolatry or sorcery.

Consider again the word "idolatry" is from the Greek word *eidololatria*, which means the worship of idols. The word *eidolon* is Greek for a manmade idol; a heathen edifice; a pagan statue; or an image of a false god. Such idols were an offense to God in the Old Testament (see 1Samuel 5:1-4). God refused to share space with a false god! The second part of the word *eidololatria* comes from the Greek word *latria*, derived from the word *latreuo*, which means to work or to serve. However, it primarily has the meaning of one's devotion to something he worships. In a positive sense, it is used in the Old Testament Septuagint to depict the service of the priesthood. In Romans 1:9, Paul says, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit..." The word "serve" is the word *latreuo*, which means Paul, like the Old Testament priests, viewed his service to God as a part of his worship. In Romans 12:1, he used the word *latreuo* again. This time he said, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship" (CSB) or "reasonable service" (NKJV). Those latter words translate *latreuo* which implies that because of all God has done for us, it is just and fair for us to serve Him with our undivided devotion. However, when the word *latreuo* is attached to the word *eidolon*, it forms the act of idolatry which is when an individual gives his complete and undivided attention, devotion, passion, love, or commitment to a person, project, or object other than God. When something other than God takes first place in that person's mind, he has entered, at least to some measure, into the sin of idolatry.

Now let's return to the subject of "witchcraft." The word "sorcery" or "witchcraft" is from the Greek word *pharmakeia*, the Greek word for medicines or drugs. The Greek word *pharmakeia* is where we get the words pharmaceutical drugs or the word pharmacy. This word was used in connection with sorcery, magic, or witchcraft. But why was this word used to depict the works of the flesh?



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When the Church was being established in the first century, paganism ruled the Roman Empire. These were dark, demonic, pagan religions, of which one prominent feature was the use of drugs to alter the state of one's mind. Heathen worshipers would come to the pagan temples to find relief from their sicknesses, mental stresses, or a myriad of other personal problems. Rather than confront the real needs of the heathen worshipers and identify real solutions for their problems, the priests of these pagan religions poured hallucinogenic drugs into vials of wine, stirred it all together, and then gave the mixture to the worshipers to drink. After the recipients were medicated and under the influence of these mind-altering drugs, the priests would send them home, telling them that they would feel better. However, once the drug wore off, the worshipers still found themselves facing the same or even worse problems. The only way these seekers found relief from their problems was to return again and again to the pagan temples for more doses of drugs. The drugs gave the people temporary relief but offered no permanent solution. The priests were powerless to heal and incapable of solving anyone's problems. All they could do was keep dousing the worshipers with more drugs, thus temporarily altering the state of their minds and giving them a brief respite from their problems and pain. These priests were charlatans who tried to literally hypnotize people into believing their problems had gone away. But the truth is, they never dealt with the root of the problems and therefore did nothing but prolong the pain of those they pretended to help.

How does this apply to you and me today, since people in our modern-day society no longer go to pagan temples to worship? The flesh behaves the same way the pagan priests behaved in the illustration above. It doesn't know how to fix itself or anyone else. In fact, the flesh doesn't even want to be fixed. The flesh will try to convince a person to ignore his problem, to hide it with some superficial covering, or to drink alcohol and take drugs to make himself feel better. The alcohol and drugs may give that person a brief hiatus from reality, but when their effects wear off, he will still have the same problems to deal with that he had before. *I am not giving you medical advice.* If your doctor has prescribed medication for you, be faithful to take your medication. However, I am giving you spiritual advice. Don't let your flesh tell you that you can keep covering up your problems with temporary solutions. Those temporary solutions will eventually wear off or run out, and when they do, the same ol' you will resurface again.

So for our purposes in today's world, the word "witchcraft," from the Greek word *pharmakeia*, would refer to the flesh's attempts to avoid being confronted and changed. In fact, the flesh would rather be told a lie than confronted with the truth! It wants someone to stroke it and to assure it, "You don't need to change! Here, let me make you feel better! Just ignore those wrong things in your life, because if you ignore them long enough, they will somehow go away!" Doesn't that sound just like someone on drugs?

Both of these works, witchcraft and idolatry, are subtle. As such, it's helpful to make ourselves aware of a few of the warning signs that something is becoming an idol.

Tim Keller, in *Counterfeit Gods*, has given one of the better definitions of idolatry:

"What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give ... An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.' There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship."

Using Keller's definition helps us to see that really anything can become an idol. While it is possible that a spouse can be an idol, it's also possible to truly be enamored with your God-given spouse, and it *not be* idolatry. It's okay to deeply love. But we do see that hearts can be drawn away from the Lord. Idolatry is real. And the warning we mentioned before in 1 John 5:21 ought to be heeded, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." How do I know if something is slowly becoming an idol?



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Where do I turn when I'm in need? The heart of idolatry has to do with where our hearts find their security. If my crops are failing and I need rain, where do I turn? That was a primary concern with the agrarian society in the Old Testament. The people were turning to other gods (that aren't gods) for protection and care. When a warring nation is threatening to invade — where does that nation turn? Will it turn to worldly powers? That is really the heart of idolatry.

Am I willing to sin in order to acquire or keep this Thing? The rich young ruler clearly loved his wealth more than his service to the Lord: it was in a very real sense, the idol of his heart. When Christ called him into discipleship, the young man walked away from Jesus instead of his money. He couldn't part with his idol. And as Paul wrote to Colossae, he said to put a death to this in your heart: "and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). The Bible uses several words for greed. One means, literally, the love of silver. Paul uses it (1 Timothy 6:10), "the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil." Another translates the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:7), means "desire." The main sense is the desire to have more and more things in an attempt to satisfy myself. If I'm willing to compromise on biblical truth or biblical principles or diminish my relationship with Christ, then it is an indicator that this relationship or this thing has a hold on my heart. Idols require our obedience. When we obey our idols, we expect to receive something in exchange. Idols are gods which must be pleased and they are never satisfied.

Does this Thing heighten my emotions in relationship? Our emotions are a bit like the dashboard lights on our car. If they start blinking, we do well to check under the hood to see what's going on. If I find myself getting angry, sad, afraid, or worried, it might be time to check under the hood to see if my attachment to this thing is inordinate. It does not always indicate idolatry — but we tend to "cling" to idols. When they are threatened, we respond with negative emotions.

Psalm 115 demonstrated the "nothingness" that our idols are. God reminded Israel of the same because He was their provision. It has been suggested that we should likewise put our idols to the test. Bring them out into the open and ascertain the weight we have surrendered to them versus Him. Then, we come to realize that it is in Christ where we find what our hearts truly desire. You destroy idols by preaching the fullness of the gospel to yourself. Jesus is better!

Likewise, Sorcery can have many forms. While its connection to the pharmaceutical aspect mentioned above will be connected to drunkenness later, even in our western world there are Wiccan groups and other things that celebrate the occult, darkness and black magic. Sorcery is, by its very nature, deceptive (Revelation 18:23), because it spreads the lie that demonic influence is interesting and can even be "good."

Beware of attempts to desensitize your mind to the reality of the occult. If we believe the Bible, then we must accept that the occult (in all its forms) is "evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Chronicles 33:6).

Actively flee any witchcraft, sorcery or obsession with the occult that you encounter. The Bible tells us to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Future Lessons

- SINS of INTemperance: drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar (May 10).
- SINS of Hostility: hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, and envy (May 17, 24, 31)