

COUNTERFEIT GODS STUDY GUIDE

(content made by Westminster Chapel, London)

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INTRODUCTION TO COUNTERFEIT GODS

Preparation

Read the Introduction to *Counterfeit Gods*.

Consider the questions below. These questions are only intended to be a guide to provoke valuable gospel-centred conversations, please don't feel pressured to discuss every question every time you meet.

Questions (for text-theology-life, see Appendix)

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. How did you become a Christian? Take time to share your personal testimonies with each other (to help you to get to know each other's backgrounds and histories) and identify any idols in your past.
3. What is an idol? Give some examples of good things in life that can become idols.
4. 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 fulfil you.

Spend time asking God to forgive you for the times you have desired some good things more than you ought. Ask him to continue to reveal hidden idols in your heart.

Share any personal requests, challenges, hopes and fears. Pray for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED

Preparation

Read Chapter 1 of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Read Genesis 22 and Hebrews 11:17-19.

Consider the questions below.

Questions (for text-theology-life)

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. What would be the equivalent to Abraham sacrificing his firstborn son in today's society?
3. Why is Abraham's statement in Genesis 22:5 particularly significant?
4. 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?

9. 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?
10. What are the two responses we can have when our 'Isaacs' are under threat?
11. Has an idol been exposed that you would like to share with your fight club (if you haven't done so already)?

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 praying together and for each other. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you and the men/women in your fight club strength to walk up the mountain.

Share any personal requests, challenges, hopes and fears. Pray for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

LOVE IS NOT ALL YOU NEED

Preparation

Read Chapter 2 of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Read Genesis 29.

Consider the questions below.

Questions (for text-theology-life)

1. Identify the evidence in the passage which 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?

6. How does the statement in Q5 play out in your life?

7. 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. Share a time when you faced severe disappointment or disillusionment. What did you learn from this experience?

8. 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?

9. 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 saviours.

“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 for us. Pray for a fresh awakening in your heart to the beauty and worth of the gospel.

Share any personal requests, challenges, hopes and fears. Pray for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

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

10. Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. How do we root out the love of money in our own lives?

11. 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

Preparation

Read Chapter 4 of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Read 2 Kings 5:1-5.

Consider the questions below.

Questions (for text-theology-life)

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 which 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. What were the consequences of Naaman's leprosy despite his wealth, success and power?

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

11. 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.

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

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

14. Naaman eventually humbled himself and went to the Jordan. How did Naaman's journey to healing assault his worship of success at every point?

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". We don't have to do it because Jesus has.

Jesus's salvation is received not through strength but through the admission of weakness and need. And Jesus's salvation was achieved not through strength but through surrender, service, sacrifice, and death. This is one of the great messages of the Bible: God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Confess your weakness and need of a saviour. Thank Jesus for humbling himself, even to death, for you.

5. How was this dream a call to humility?

6. 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”?

7. Nebuchadnezzar had taken personal credit for his rise to prominence. Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7. How does remembering this truth prevent us from “taking pride in one man over against another”?

8. 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?

9. Read Jeremiah 18:1-6. How best are we to respond to the Potter when He chooses to remould, bend and squeeze us? How does having a long-term perspective help us in this situation?

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 Saviour. Only by admitting our sin, need, and powerlessness, and by casting ourselves on his mercy, will we finally become secure in his love, and therefore empowered in a way that does not lead us to oppress others.

Humble yourself and turn to God instead of living for your own glory, then the death of your pride can lead to a resurrection. Finally you can emerge, fully human, with a tender heart instead of a hard heart.

Share any personal requests, challenges, hopes and fears. Pray for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

THE HIDDEN IDOLS IN OUR LIVES

Preparation

Read Chapter 6 of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Read Jonah 1.

Consider the questions below.

Questions (for text-theology-life)

1. In what ways can idolatry function inside religious communities? What are the consequences of such idolatry?
2. What is the significance of God calling Jonah to go to Nineveh?
3. 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?
4. How was God gracious to Jonah despite his disobedience?
5. Jonah prays to God from inside the big fish. What does Jonah finally realise? How had his idolatry blinded him to the grace of God?

6. 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?

7. In Jonah 4:1-3, the motives of Jonah's heart are finally revealed. Why was Jonah so angry with God?

8. Jonah realised 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?

9. 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?

10. What do you notice about Jonah's anger in Jonah 4:4-9? What does this teach about the power of idols over our feelings, thoughts and actions?

11. Have you ever erupted in unwarranted and disproportionate anger as a result of an idol in your life?

12. 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?

13. How does remembering Jesus help us in our struggle against idols?

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.

Thank God for sending his Son for us. Ask him to forgive you for when you have desired some good things more than you ought. Ask him to continue to reveal hidden idols in your heart.

Share any personal requests, challenges, hopes and fears. Pray for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

THE END OF COUNTERFEIT GODS & EPILOGUE

Preparation

Read Chapter 7 and the Epilogue of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Read Genesis 32 and Romans 1.

Consider the questions below.

Questions (for text-theology-life)

1. Why did Jacob steal Esau's blessing in Genesis 27?
2. What did Jacob finally realise 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. Read Galatians 3:13-14. What is the "promise of the Spirit"?

5. 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

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

7. 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?

8. Read Colossians 3:1-5. What does it mean to set your mind and heart on the things above?

9. How will doing this replace counterfeit gods in your life?
10. What will happen if you uproot the idol but fail to plant the love of Christ in its place?
11. What happens to us when we rejoice over God's sacrificial, suffering love for us?
12. 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 realise 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. When we rejoice over Christ's sacrificial love for us *most fully*, we are *most truly* convicted of our sin. Rejoicing and repentance must go together.