

PREACHING SKILLS

## Gospel Preaching That Radically Changes Lives

**How to discern, expose, and challenge the idols**

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 Send to printer**Topics:** Application; Audience; Changing lives; Culture; Evangelistic preaching; Gospel; Hearers; Relevance

Acts 19:23 says:

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the way. A silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of Artemis brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together along with the workmen in related trades, and said, "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business, and you see and hear how this fellow, Paul, has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that manmade gods are no gods at all. There is a danger not only that our trade will lose its good name but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited and the goddess herself who has worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world will be robbed of her divine majesty." When they heard this they were furious and began shouting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another, and most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews pushed Alexander to the front and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people, but when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Finally, the city clerk quieted the crowd and said, "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If then Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open. They are the proconsuls, they can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged rioting because of today's events, and in that case we would not be able to account for this commotion since there is no reason for it." After he said this he dismissed the assembly.

That's the reading of God's Word. The main thing I would like to show you is that **Paul, in his**

preaching of the gospel, always took on and challenged the idols of the culture, the idols of the peoples' hearts. Therefore you can't really minister the gospel in a life-changing way unless you also, like Paul always did, discern and expose and challenge the idols of your place. What I would like to show you here is something about how to discern idols, how to expose idols, and then finally how to destroy idols.

## Discerning Idols

First, discerning idols. Paul preached the gospel in such a way that it changed his converts' lives. Because he went after the idols of the region and the idols of the peoples' hearts, when people converted it so changed the way in which they lived in the world that it affected the culture. See, in most cases today, there's a lot of folks having born again experiences, as they say, deciding for Christ, saying, "I've received Christ as my Savior," but they don't live any differently than anyone else in the culture. That's actually one of the scandals of our church. I think it's because their idols weren't confronted with the gospel. Paul confronted the idols of the culture so his converts changed in the way in which they lived to the extent that the very economy was affected, the culture was affected.

Unless you know how to deal with idols when you're preaching the gospel, you're not going to produce converts or people that live any differently.

Now, how did he do that? Acts 19 doesn't actually give us a sermon from Paul, which is rather unusual, though it gives us a little synopsis. I slowed down as we went over it so you could hear it. Demetrius actually gives a synopsis of the kind of preaching Paul was doing. He says Paul says, "Manmade gods are no gods at all." See, that's

actually discerning and exposing. He was talking about the idols, and he went after the idols. Now, we don't learn more than that in this passage, so if you want to know something about this sermon, this kind of preaching, it's not that hard: you go back through the rest of Acts. You'll see Paul confronting the idols in Acts 14. You see him confronting in Acts 16 in Philippi. But probably the most famous place is Acts 17, where he preached at Athens. If you go back there, and we won't do that very long since we're trying to expound this passage, you will see three things about how Paul dealt with idols in his preaching.

First of all, when he went into Athens, we see in chapter 17, verse 16, he saw the city was filled with idols. He saw the idols; he discerned the idols; he recognized them. I don't think you can administer the gospel very well unless you look around your city and see the idols; figure out what they are. Every gender has a set of idols, every culture has a set of idols, every class has a set of idols, every race has a set of idols, every individual has a set of idols. And Paul knew what they were.

The second thing he did when he got in there was he went to the Agora to preach against the idols. Now again, not to go too deep into Acts 17, but you and I, when we see the word *agora*—which is always translated *the marketplace*—when we see Paul went into the marketplace to preach, we in our culture now only think of the marketplace or the public square as a place where there's a lot of shops and maybe foot traffic. So when you and I hear that Paul went into the *agora*, the marketplace, to preach against the idols, you and I think about individual evangelism. He just wanted to find individuals and preach the gospel to them. And of course he did, but you have to realize something about the *agora*. That's where the

culture was formed.

Look, this was before print, essentially. Communication had to happen face to face. And therefore, the *agora*, the marketplace, was the place not only where there was commercial culture going on, which of course was very important—that's where the business happened—it was also the place where the theaters were. This was the place where the public halls were, where everything was debated. This was the place where the law courts were, where the state houses were. In other words, for Paul to take the gospel and confront the idols in the marketplace would be like our going to Hollywood, to Harvard and to the *The New York Times*. He is not just out on the street. Today when we go literally out on the street, all we do is get individuals. We don't get into the culture, because the culture is actually not there anymore, really. But in that time and place, Paul was taking the gospel into Hollywood, into Harvard, and into the boardroom of the *The New York Times*. That's what he was doing, and he began preaching against idols.

And what are the idols? Over every marketplace—certainly we know in Athens, also in Ephesus—over the *agora* were always the shrines, the temples, and the actual images of the gods, the idols. The idols overshadowed the marketplace because all cultures are based on idols. Every individual life and every community and every culture that's not based on the glory and the grace of God is going to be based on some created thing in God's place. Everyone and every community and every culture looks to something to save it, something to rescue it. It puts its hope, it puts its meaning, in something.

For example, beauty is a great thing, but if you mythologize it, if you raise it up to the level of deity in a person's or a culture's life—where that's what really matters more than anything else, where it becomes a kind of ultimate value—then you have Aphrodite, not just beauty. Human reason is a great thing, but when you lift it up to the place where that's the thing that's going to save us—science, human reason—where that's how we decide what is right or wrong—human reason—then you have Athena. Money is a very helpful thing to have. Making money can be a great deal of fun, and if you do very well in it you can do an awful lot of good. It's great to make money. But when it becomes the ultimate thing, when it becomes the central thing in the life of a culture or an individual, then you have Artemis.

These gods overshadowed the marketplace, not just because that was an architectural motif of some kind, but because every single culture is dominated by idols, unless it's dominated by the glory and the grace of God. When Paul went into the *agora*, he identified what those idols were and he went after them.

Now, we have to do the same thing, and at this point I need to deal with an objection. It goes like this: "Well, yeah, of course Paul always had to preach against idols, and you're saying that we have to preach against idols to really preach the gospel in a life-changing, culture-shaping way, but we don't have idols anymore. We're in modern, Western culture, and people aren't bowing down to little statues anywhere. So how in the world should we be coming against idols?" The answer to that is, biblically speaking, please don't be naïve.

By the way, if you want a far better version of this message that you're getting from me right now, you might want to look up an old worthy Puritan named David Clarkson, whose three-volume set of works was put out by Banner Truth a long time ago, but it's out of print now. In

the second volume David Clarkson has an unbelievably thorough, typically Puritan, sermon called, "Soul Idolatry Excludes Men out of Heaven." His whole point is this: he says physical idolatry, bowing down with your body to a physical image, is not really all that different, and a lot less prevalent, than the real sin, which he called *soul idolatry*, bowing down to something that probably doesn't have a physical image, in your heart. In other words, you can make anything into an idol, anything at all. Doesn't have to be a statue; it almost never is.

Now, where do you get this from the Scripture? Recently I was looking at some of the great passages in the Old Testament about idolatry: [Ezekiel 16](#), [Jeremiah 2](#) and [3](#), Hosea. Those prophets used one of the three basic metaphors in the Bible for idolatry. One of the basic metaphors is that of *spiritual adultery*. We love our false gods, and therefore we commit spiritual adultery with them. Another metaphor is not the marital metaphor, but the political or covenantal metaphor: *we serve idols. They become spiritual masters*. The third metaphor is the religious metaphor: *we look to our gods to save us*. We sacrifice to them.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel said: you have bowed down to the gods; you committed idolatry when you entered treaties for political protection, protective treaties with Egypt and Assyria. Now, I've been reading this thing for years and never noticed this. When those prophets say that's idolatry, to have entered into those protective treaties with Egypt and Assyria, surely the government officials of Israel must have said, "We're not bowing down to the gods of Assyria; we're not bowing down to the gods of Egypt. What are you talking about?" But what the prophets were trying to say is, you gave up money and independence and took on political subjugation so that the great Egypt or the great Assyria would protect you. What the prophets were saying is, when you look to some created thing to give you what only God can give you, that's idolatry. They weren't bowing down, but when you look to anything to give you what only God can give you, that's idolatry.

Let's drill down briefly. What's an idol? *An idol's anything in your life that is so central to your life that you can't have a meaningful life if you lose it. Idolatry is anything you look at, and in your heart of hearts you say, *If I have that, then my life has value, then my life has meaning. If I would lose that, I don't know how I would live.** An idol can be anything. An idol can be family and children. It could be career or making money. It can be achievement or critical acclaim. It can be social standing or a romantic relationship. It can be your competence and skill. It can be physical beauty, either in yourself or your partner. It can be some political or social cause. It could be your moral record. It could be your religious activity and even your ministry success. All of those things can be idols.

Here's why. When you lose one of those things, and it's just a good thing to you, then you're sad. But if you lose one of those things and it has become an ultimate thing—it's not just a good thing but an ultimate thing—then you want to throw yourself off a bridge. *That's how you can know whether that's an idol in your life, because you can't live without it.* Most people in America say, "I believe in God." They may even say, "I go to church." Yet they are so invested in their career that if it goes south—or they're so invested in a particular romantic relationship, that if they break up—or *they're so invested in their ministry success that if it goes south, they want to kill themselves.* That shows you're in the thrall of an idol, in the arms of an idol. When you take a finite, limited thing, a relative thing, and make it into an absolute, when you take a good thing and make it into an ultimate thing, you've created an idol, and you're enthralled to it.

This is why the pagans weren't crazy to have sex gods and work gods and play gods and nature gods and national gods. There was a god for everything. You know why? Because everything could be a god. Everything, anything. **Any object, relationship, pursuit, or material thing—and especially the best ones—can take on the role of deity in your life or in a culture.**

Because Paul—and I hope now you—saw idols everywhere, he was a really effective preacher. Paul discerns the idols everywhere, and I hope we start to, and not please hide behind the idea that we don't have literal shrines or temples. We do have shrines and temples. In Boston they ask, "What does he know?" In New York they ask, "What does he make?" In Philadelphia they ask, "Who is his family?" Those are idols. Cultures have their idols. You have academic excellence, and that's what really matters, or you make a lot of money, and that's what really matters. And you know what's funny: different regions pooh-pooh people in the other city and say, "Oh, they make such a big thing about money."

Here's an interesting thing. In the business world the idol is profit; in the artistic world the idol is self-expression. So in the business world they say, "Sure, express yourself, but not if it's going to make you lose money." In the artistic world you express yourself, and if you make money, it's an insult. They say, "You've sold out," because now you're like those people over there in the financial world, and you see their idolatry. They sell out for money, but you've sold out to self-expression. What's so great about self-expression? It's an idol. **Do you see the idols in your vocational field? Do you see the idols in your city? Do you see the idols?**

## Exposing Idols

Now once you see them, the second thing is you have to expose them. That's in this little synopsis of his sermon. Paul doesn't just say there are many manmade gods around, but he also says, "And they are no gods at all." Paul knew how to expose them. Now, one of the reasons this passage is probably given to us—commentators of course, their job is to look at Acts 19 and say why. Lots of things happened to Paul, but only a few of them get into the Bible, so why did Luke decide to give us this one, especially when you don't get a sermon in it. Most of commentators say, and I'm sure they're right about this, that this was a way to show readers that the idol worshippers were wrong who said, "Our culture is falling, our social order is in jeopardy, because these Christians are preaching this gospel." And yet at the end the city clerk is trying to say, "Guess what, our social order is more at risk because of you than from the Christians." Because the idols never deliver. When idols are threatened, there's chaos, there's confusion, there's violence. When people are in the thrall of an idol, they can look pretty respectful and respectable on the outside, but you threaten that idol and they'll kill you. And so the point of the text here is that in a sense the incident exposes the idols, the weakness of the idols. It exposes the fact that they can't deliver the social order they're supposed to deliver. The big charge against the Christians was they were jeopardizing the social order by saying there's only one true God and the idols are no gods at all. This incident tries to show that no, actually the social order is more in jeopardy from the idols themselves.

Now, let's press on this. Let me give you some examples; we're here for practical ministry. There are three kinds of idols you're going to have to expose if you're going to communicate the gospel. And by the way, a lot of you are preachers, but plenty of you are not. Even if you're not a preacher, if you're trying to communicate the gospel to anybody, you need to know what

their idols are, because the gospel is you're saved by grace, and the idol is you're saved by something else. It's one thing to say, "You're saved by grace; you're not justified by works," but do you realize how many different forms of works there are? Do you realize how many different forms of works righteousness there really are out there? Unless you know what form you're talking to, how do you know how to apply the gospel to it? Let me give you three kinds of idols that you have to expose: personal idols, religious idols, and cultural idols.

1. *Personal idols.* Let me give you just three. Every individual—and that means every individual, Christian or not—because we're sinners, we don't want to believe that we're justified by grace. We don't want to rely on God and on Christ for our salvation, so we're going to rely on something else. Any life that's not built on God's glory and his grace is going to be built on the deification of something else. It's going to be built on turning something else into a pseudosavior, some way in which you save yourself without having to go to God, so you think you're keeping control of your life, but you're really not. Romans 1 says that's really how sin works itself out in everybody's life; it's always idolatry. Romans 1 is pretty remarkable about that. It's talking about sin in general in the whole human race, and it basically says idolatry is at the essence of all sin.

Let me give you three personal idols. One is dealt with here: money. Artemis ended up becoming in a sense the goddess of business, because Artemis was the goddess of the moon, of the hunt, and also of fertility. Because she was the goddess of fertility, she became associated with fertility of the ground and therefore of a good harvest, and therefore of financial prosperity. And on top of that—there was a reference to this by the city clerk—a meteorite fell to earth near Ephesus, and many people thought the meteorite looked like a statue of Artemis. "Gosh, she sent us her own image." And so they set it up, and they created the temple of Artemis, or the temple of Diana, which was seven times bigger than the Parthenon. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Everybody wanted to come see the meteorite. Everybody wanted to come see the size of this thing, and it became a Disney World of the ancient world. It became an enormous tourist attraction, and because of all the commercialism that went around it, the temple became fabulously rich, and Ephesus became a business center, a financial center. And Artemis became the goddess of business. If you wanted to make a lot of money, you sacrificed to her, you served her, and you honored her.

In our text, what they're afraid of is, if people aren't honoring Artemis, the whole economy might collapse, both because people are not going to be buying the statuettes, but also because if we're not honoring her then business is going to go down. And very often it was child sacrifice.

I live in an Ephesus called New York City. Let me press this a little bit. I know this is going to be shocking when I tell you this, but do you know all over New York City there is the practice of child sacrifice? Because, see, the goddess of business—in New York City, if you want to get in the financial world and make a lot of money, you have to sacrifice your family. The jobs are set up that way. The work is structured that way. You have to sacrifice your family. You will not be a good father or mother; you can't be. And that's what you do. If you're going to get the money, if you're going to get the power, you have to sacrifice to the goddess.

In New York City, if you're a Christian, do we want to say, "Oh, okay, no Christians in the financial world"? I don't think we want to say that. I don't think that's great. I think we need to

say every single part of the world is Jesus' part of the world, and making money is not intrinsically wrong, and finance is not intrinsically wrong. It can be a great thing. And yet, for Christians to walk into a place that is dominated by this god, this idol, that demands child sacrifice is really tough. How do you get in there and still do your job and not bow down? In other words, how do you make money just money? How do you demythologize it so it's not Artemis, the goddess? How do you demythologize it, so it's not your identity, it's not your main value, it's not your salvation, it's just money? How do you do that? Only with the gospel. We'll get back to that.

Let me give you a second kind of personal idol, and that's romance. If fall in love with somebody, oh my, it's very, very powerful. And therefore, this is a very hard line to draw, but if you actually look to this other person not just for all the wonderful things that a human love relationship, especially marriage, can give you, if that person's love is the only thing that makes you feel worthy or valuable at all, if you feel like, "I'm nobody unless this person loves me"—if in your heart of hearts that's how you are—then first of all you're going to put no boundaries on your relationships. You're going to get into lots of relationships in which you shouldn't have sex, and you know you shouldn't, but you do. You shouldn't be practically married, or married, to a non-Christian, but you do. Why? There's no boundaries.

Listen, what's the difference between a slave master and a boss? Bosses can't do anything to you, can they? There's a limit to what they can do. Slave masters could literally do anything. They could beat you, they could rape you, they could kill you. Slave masters had no boundaries. How do you know whether your love relationship is just a love relationship or it's Aphrodite—it's mythological? It's grown to mythological proportions. You have no boundaries. See, your idol is doing anything it wants with you. You feel bad about that, but you do it, because you can't lose this person. You feel bad about that, but you can't lose this person. You lie, you cheat, to cover up your affair. It's a personal idol.

Let me give you one more personal idol: money, romantic love, and then children. Now, in the evangelical world we don't think of children as idols, but let me tell you there are all kinds of parents out there who are looking at their children and essentially in their heart of hearts are saying, *If my children are happy, if my children are believers, if my children grow up to love me, if my children are successful, then I know that I'm worth something.* And if that's how you look at your children, not just as good things but as ultimate things, and you start to live out your life through your children, the child is either going to stay near you and live a crushed life, because that child will always be crushed under the weight of your expectations, or that child will get as far away from you as possible. And because you have turned that child into an idol, it will wound you in a way that you'll never get over, and you'll be mad at God. *How dare God do such a thing as this! I can't believe in God.* But the depth of the wound is your own making.

Unless you understand personal idols, your counseling, your pastoring, your preaching, is going to be superficial. You're just going to be laying ideas and concepts on people. It's not going to touch them. For example, Martin Luther, in his larger catechism, in his exposition to the Ten Commandments, it's so crucial. The first commandment says, "Have no other gods before me." Luther said, I don't think it's an accident that the idolatry commandment is first. He said, the more I think about it, you never, ever break commandments two through ten without first breaking number one. The sin underneath all other sins is the sin of idolatry.

Here's an example: If you lie, you're breaking one of the Ten Commandments, but why did you lie in any particular situation? Well, you say, "I lied because I was just so afraid of losing face." In other words, human opinion is more important at that moment to your self worth and your value than Jesus. Which means that's an idol. You wouldn't have lied except you failed to rest in Christ as your salvation, as your righteousness. Human opinion is your salvation and your righteousness. You don't really believe the gospel at that point. You say, "I believe in the gospel of grace," but basically you're being saved by works, functionally, at heart level. You can't understand moral failings without understanding idolatry.

You also can't understand psychological problems without idolatry. Years ago when I was a young pastor, I had two women at the same time in my church who were bitter against their husbands, and their marriages were falling apart. Now, their husbands were not believers, and the wives were. But the reason they were so bitter was because each of them had one son, one child, an adolescent child, and the husbands were being such poor fathers the sons were acting up and beginning to get into a lot of trouble. I remember thinking, *The very first thing I need to help these women with is to forgive their husbands*. I said, "You better forgive your husbands, because you're not going to be able to talk with them when you're so angry. You're not going to be able to see any communication going on when you're as bitter as you are. You're in the right on what your husbands are doing wrong, but the way in which you're expressing yourself, you're always shooting yourself in the foot. There's no way a man's going to listen to somebody talking in the tone of voice you're talking in, with the anger and the bitterness."

What was weird to me at the time, as a young minister, was that one of the women, who was a less mature Christian and who actually had the worse husband of the two, forgave her husband. And the other woman, who was a more experienced Christian and really had a better husband of the two, couldn't forgive. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't. I realized years later when I looked back, here was the difference: they both loved their sons—both of those women loved their sons—but the woman who couldn't forgive had turned her son into an idol. Partly because she had a cold relationship with her husband, over the years she had turned and said, *The main way in which I get love in the world is my son. If my son loves me, everything is okay. I believe in God, but if my son doesn't love me, I don't even want to live*. And she couldn't forgive.

People say to me, "I believe God's forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." Have you ever said that? Have you ever talked to anybody who says that? That happens all the time in pastoral work. "I know God's forgiven me; I can't forgive myself." **What it means is there is a higher god in their life than God;** they failed something else. For example, many people are driven by parental expectations, and when they fail to reach those parental expectations they hate themselves, and they beat themselves up. Whenever they fail, it's, "I know God forgives me; I can't forgive myself," but what that really means is their real god—which is their parents with their parental expectations—doesn't forgive them. Their real god, their spiritual master, is cursing them. The gods are always violent. There's no mercy in those gods. You need to repent of your idolatry and recognize the fact that you say you believe in Jesus Christ, but functionally speaking he is really not your Savior; your parents are your saviors.

This is all through the Bible, that money can be an idol, greed is idolatry, [Colossians 3:5](#), [Ephesians 5:5](#). Politics can be an idol. You've made the Egyptians, you've made the Assyrians

into an idol. You have to expose them for what they are. They're killing you. They can't deliver, they can't give you the salvation they say they're going to give. They can't give you the social order they say they're going to give. They can't give you the joy they say they're going to give. You expose them.

2. *Religious idols.* You're not going to be good communicators of the gospel unless you know how to take on religious idols. Religious idols? Oh, yeah. See, just as money worshipers think they're just hard-working, and child worshipers think they're just loving their kids, those who worship religious idols think they're very devoted to God. But they're not. Remember what an idol is; an idol is some good thing you're looking to instead of God for your salvation, a good thing you're looking to as more crucial to your value and your security and your confidence and your meaning in life than God is.

There are three things that busy, religious people—and here I'm using the term in the broadest sense—busy people in the church, very busy people in the evangelical church, evangelical ministers, there are three idols that we tend to trust instead of God: truth, gifts, and morality. First of all, here's what I mean by truth. Is it possible to say, "I am okay, I'm saved, because of the rightness of my belief," instead of, "I'm okay, because Jesus Christ died for me?" Is it possible to rest your salvation, as it were, functionally in the rightness of your doctrine? Yeah.

Proverbs has several categories of fools, and one of the categories of fools mentioned 17 times is the scoffer, which some translations call the scorner, or the mocker. There are two marks of this scoffer. The first mark is he's dogmatic and closed in his mind. He never admits he's wrong. He's sure he's right. Well, that could be true of somebody who just believes the truth and does not make an idol of the truth. But the second mark is a mocker and scorner always, always, always is disrespectful to opponents, always belittling, always mocking, always disdainful. That's why they're called scornors or mockers.

Now, keep this in mind: sarcasm and bluntness clearly is sometime warranted. You see it in Elijah, being sarcastic and mocking, actually. Talking to the priests of Baal in . You can see it in Paul, dealing with his opponents in chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians. But when it's your default mode, when you're always disdainful of people who differ with you—always—you're always down there, you're always making fun of them, you're always mocking, you're always sarcastic, according to Proverbs you're a fool. Here's the reason why you're a fool. (By the way, of all the fools it's the one with the least hope, because you could only be always disdainful, making fun of everybody who differs with you, if you were basically a doctrinal Pharisee. Which is to say, "Here's how I know that I'm okay: I'm right and you're not.") There's a sense of superiority—which of course the gospel takes away—that is rank with a scorner and a mocker. Now, what's scary about this, of course, besides the fact that Proverbs says of all the fools it's the most far gone, is that the internet breeds scoffers, because traffic is increased to your blog if you're a scoffer. Isn't that right? Tell me I'm wrong. What this means is **it's possible to make an idol out of truth.**

Secondly, it is just as possible to make an idol out of gifts. Jonathan Edwards in his "Charity and Its Fruits" sermons, in the first or second one, has an absolutely amazing, devastating critique of one of the great mistakes that evangelicals make today, and that is **the mistaking of spiritual gifts for spiritual fruit.** We look at spiritual gifts and we mistake them for spiritual fruit. Spiritual gifts are leadership and preaching and teaching and evangelism and ministry success.

Spiritual fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, self control, humility. What Edwards points out—which is so important—is that when you are a great communicator or you have great musical gifts or you have great leadership gifts or something, and as a result your ministry is successful, and a lot of people come, and it grows, essentially, even though you say you believe in justification by grace, you actually believe in justification by ministry. The reason you feel like, *I know God's with me, I know I'm okay, I know I'm right*, is because *Look at all the things that are happening through me*. And of course if you're a minister, your people will be very happy to conspire to affirm that.

Every tradition is different. I would say in the Reformed world—I see this with young guys—we make an idol out of being a great preacher. I know a lot of guys who, more than anything, they want to be great preachers. They make an idol out of the gift of preaching. They want people to flock to their banner, because they're such great preachers, and as a result they're not working on pastoring, they're not working on listening to people, they're not working on evangelism. They're working on their messages. They want that more than anything else. It's an idol. I know a lot of guys who don't even want to be in the ministry if they're not going to be great preachers. In other words, *you've got this paradigm of what the ministry has got to look like, and it's all based on mistaking spiritual gifts for spiritual fruit*.

You can make an idol out of truth, you can make an idol out of gifts, and of course (my book *The Prodigal God* is about this) it is typical for Christians to take their—it's garden variety legalism—it's typical for Christians to say the reason God loves me is because I'm so sold out for the Lord. I come to church, I take notes on the sermon, I'm praying, I'm having my quiet time, I'm trying to obey the Ten Commandments. Surely God has to bless me. He has to answer my prayers. That's garden variety moralism and legalism. It's taking a moral record, which is a good thing, moral righteousness, which is a great thing, holiness, which is a great thing, and turning it into an idol. Trusting in that instead of in God. Trusting in truth instead of in God. Trusting in your ministry success instead of in God.

I'll tell you something: unless you know how to deal with those idols when you're preaching the gospel, you're not going to produce converts or people that live any differently, because these are forms of worldliness. When you get out into the world, everybody thinks they're right, and they're bashing everybody. That's called ideology. *What is ideology? An idea, my system of thought, turned into an idol*. I mean, you go out there, and that's how everybody else is. That's the reason why the world looks inside and doesn't see us living any differently. That's the reason *we're not changing the culture*.

There's an awful lot of people out there that say they're born again. Something like 34 percent of the population says they've had a born again experience. I doubt very much that a third of the population of Ephesus had become Christian, and yet there was enough people living lives of such distinctiveness that it was changing the economy. If a third of the people that said, "I've been born again; I'm evangelical Christian," we're living in a very different way, we'd have changed the culture. But it's not happening. Now, here's one of the reasons why, because when we communicate the gospel, we don't go after idols.

3. *Cultural idols*. In some ways, evangelicals like to talk about cultural idols. It's fair. For example, what was the Enlightenment? It was taking human reason, a good thing, and making it an ultimate thing. *I'm not going to accept anything in the Bible my reason doesn't*

*understand, so I'm going to cut the Bible into pieces and accept only part of it. It's a disaster.*

There is another way in which human reason becoming an idol was a disaster. The cultural elites for at least 100 years believed—and they still do to some degree—that through science, technology, and education we would be able to get rid of poverty and racism. Human reason was going to bring all this. It hasn't worked, of course, and the results have been devastating, utterly devastating.

For example, in 1920 H. G. Wells, in his book *The Outline of History*, praised belief in human progress. He said once we overcome the superstition of religion and start to apply science to everything, we would go from strength to strength and get rid of poverty and war and racism.

In 1933, in his book *The Shape of Things to Come*, he was appalled by the selfishness and the violence of nations. He was appalled by the lack of progress on the program he had wanted. He actually said the only hope was for "rational, reasonable, educated intellectuals to seize control of all the governments and to run a compulsory educational program stressing peace, justice and equity."

In 1945, at the end of the second of two world wars, he wrote a book: *A Mind at the End of Its Tether*. This is a quote: "Homo sapiens"—as he likes to call himself; notice that homo sapiens means the rational, the wise—"Homo sapiens is spent. This is the end." One commentator said, "What happened?" Wells had put all this hope—he had made an idol, and it was ideology. He put all of his hope in the ability of humanity to solve its problems with reason and science. And what happened? The fact of original sin forced itself into the mind of a man who had no grasp of God's grace or power, and it came to the end of its tether.

See, your gods will always let you down. That's the point. The gods will never bring you what you think. They won't bring you social order. Actually, if you give in to these gods, any god but God is going to bring down the social order.

There are also broad cultural idols. Here's what I mean by that. In traditional cultures—and a lot of people here are from them, or their parents are—in traditional cultures the idol is the family. Individualism is gone; the idol is the family. And by the way, many of us say, "Oh, yes, we hate Western individualism. It's just terrible." And it is. I'll get there in a second, but you know what? There's an opposite to that, and that is the family as an idol. In cultures in which the family is an idol, what matters more than anything else is your family. Everything for the family. Then you have things like honor killings: you kill the women that have disgraced the family, even if it's your daughter. Honor killings. Women are treated as chattel. Gay people are bashed and literally killed. That's traditional culture.

Then, on the other hand, we have Western culture, and Western culture says the individual and my feelings are an absolute. And what you have today in an individualistic culture is, no one must tell anybody else that they're wrong. No one must tell anybody that their beliefs are wrong. No one must ever even offend anybody. So if you say something that offends and upsets this person, that's wrong.

But of course what's going on is, the idea that you should not tell anybody that their beliefs about God are wrong is itself a belief about God, which is being imposed. To say you can't tell people that their beliefs about God are wrong is a belief about the nature of God that is being

imposed; and therefore postmodern relativism, like all idolatry, is violent at its core. And yet it's failing. High critical theory, which is where all the postmodern deconstruction stuff came from, is dead in academia, because of what I just told you. That inconsistency, they see it. The gods always fail.

Let me give you another example. The political swings that we have are idolatry. I'm so old that I remember in the '70s the people who were killing—it was genocide—they were communists, they were atheists, they were the terrorists. They were killing people by the millions. They were the communists, right. And the corruption, the high corruption, the moral corruption, was in government: Watergate. And so what did we decide? Free enterprise, the free market, Reagan, Thatcher, you see. Secular humanists, they're the bad guys, because it's the atheists that are killing people and it's the government that is corrupt. So what we need is free enterprise and competition. Let's lower taxes and stress traditional values. So you have the conservative movement come in with Reagan and Thatcher in the early '80s. Now what's going on? Who's killing the people? It's the religious fundamentalists. Oh, it's the religious people that are bad. Yeah. And where's the corruption? Oh, it's in business. Yeah. So let's raise the taxes, and let's rely on the state.

In the *The New York Times*, there was an article recently about Bernie Madoff. It's a pretty big deal in New York City since everybody knew him. Somebody said, "Of course human beings are selfish, and they're greedy, and they're going to do stuff like that. Of course. That's why we have government, to regulate it." What's a government? Isn't government people? Conservative ideology says state is bad; private enterprise is good. It will give us all we need. Liberal ideology says private enterprise, capitalism, is oppressive, and centralized government, the state, will give us all we need. We're going to go back and forth. Why? Ideology. Idolatry. Absolutely.

Do you understand? Do you know the idols? Can you expose them?

What's going to happen, by the way, is, there's going to be a crash. Every time we say, "Oh, the whole problem is over here, so let's get away from those people," we demonize those people, and we idolize these people over here, and then there will be a breakdown. Why? Because people are people. There will be corruption in government, and then we'll have a swing back. I hope I'm dead by then. These swings take 30 or 40 years, so I probably won't be around.

## Destroying Idols

My last point is the briefest and probably in some ways the best. How do you actually do something? Not just expose the idols, but how do you actually destroy them? Well, notice this part of the text; it's right here. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. Now, the point is that when the idols are opposed, it's dangerous. As I've said all along, idols are violent. Now, the Bible is ambivalent—and that's a weird thing to say about the Bible—but the biblical writers are ambivalent about whether idols are something or nothing. On the one hand, idols are empty. They're worthless things. You've taken a created thing, which doesn't have the power to give you what you want. It's something you've made yourself. On the other hand, idols seem to wield enormous power over you.

The woman who was in the grip of the idolatry of her son, who never could forgive her husband—let me tell you what devastation happened. She was angry; she was violent, basically. That marriage fell apart, that family fell apart. Everybody's miserable, the kid's a mess, and here's why: Idols are nothing, but through them the powers and principalities, the forces of darkness, control us. That's the reason why on the one hand the idols are nothing, and on the other hand they're unbelievably powerful. And if you oppose them, you take your life in your hands.

But here's the key. Paul risked his life in order to defeat the powers and principalities, but was saved. Jesus—it cost him his life. The crowd cried, "Crucify him, crucify him," and they did. Why did he die? It cost Jesus his life to defeat the powers. [Colossians 2:15](#): "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them on the cross." Which means that when Jesus Christ bowed—when the world, the flesh, and the devil, when the powers and principalities, unleashed all their fury against the Son of God, he bowed his head into it and died. That storm engulfed him, as it were, and he sank. And yet we're told in doing that he defeated them. He utterly defeated the idols. He utterly defeated the powers and principalities behind them. How so? He did it objectively and subjectively.

First of all, he did it objectively. If you're really serious about understanding idolatry, really serious, you've got to [read a book by two Jewish philosophers, written in 1992, put out by Harvard University Press, called \*Idolatry\*. The two writers last names are Halbertal and Margalit.](#) It's fascinating to watch two Jewish philosophers deal with a very important issue in Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. The authors say in the biblical metaphor of idolatry as spiritual adultery there is a conundrum, because in these texts—[Ezekiel 16](#), [Jeremiah 2](#), Hosea—adultery was a capital offense. Because adultery deserved death, in the metaphor God the husband tells the wife she must die. And by the way, according to biblical law she had to die. And yet because God is still the husband, he wants reconciliation.

It's fascinating to see the two Jewish philosophers wrestle with this, because as I said there's a profound contradiction at the heart of this spiritual idolatry metaphor. On the one hand, what's so awful about the sin of idolatry is it deserves death. But on the other hand, because it's betraying someone who loves you, the lover who is betrayed—God—wants you back. And how can he? What the authors say is, how can God both punish the adulteress as she must be punished if God is just, and reconcile with the adulteress and bring her back into a happy marriage, which he also wants. You know what they actually say? They said there's really no way through this contradiction; it's just the limitation of the metaphor. But they're wrong, because Jesus Christ, our true bridegroom, came and took the punishment that we spiritual adulteresses deserve so that he can be both just and the justifier of those who believe. And therefore he can punish our adultery and still make us again his true brides. And therefore objectively he's overcome the powers and principalities.

But subjectively, what is actually going to help me? I know Jesus died for my sins, but what's actually going to help me pull my heart off of these things that my heart really loves more than Jesus? I've got to see what he's done for me. I've got to know what he's done for me. That's why I'm singing about it; that's why I'm preaching about it; that's why I'm listening to people preach about it, because when that reality breaks through on me, that changes me on the spot. That frees me from my idols. That defeats the powers and principalities that he objectively

defeated on the cross; now subjectively that triumph is coming into my life.

You've just got to remember this: if you live for your career, your career can't die for your sins. In fact, if you fail your career, it'll punish you forever. The person I love most in the world is my wife, Kathy, and my wife and I know that our biggest temptation of idolatry is the other person. It is very, very hard not to slip into idolatry with your wife or your husband if your marriage is good. But here's what I've got to keep telling myself: I've got to love Jesus more than my wife. The only way that's going to happen is if I worship and pray and think the gospel deep into my heart, so that as much as I love my wife, Jesus Christ is my lover, number one, is my King, is my Savior, and I see what he's done for me, and it pulls my heart up to him.

I don't want to love my wife less. I want to love him more. But I know this: One or the other of us is going to look at the other person in a coffin, and if our savior is in that coffin, how will our savior help us when our heart is breaking? There's only one Savior that can always help you when your heart is breaking, who will be able to help you face anything, even that.

Do you know how to take the gospel to the idols? If you learn how to do that, then and only then will we turn the world upside down.

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