

# Removing Idols from Our Lives

If you have spent any length of time in a church, you have probably heard some talk about idols. Not the American Idol sort, but the kind that people have worshipped throughout time.

The first place in Scripture where most people are exposed to the concept of idols is Exodus 20, where God is laying out the Ten Commandments for his fledgling nation, Israel, in the desert.

*“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. 6 But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands. (Exodus 20:4-5, NLT)”*

If you have been in church for any length of time, you have also probably heard someone compare things in our modern lives to these physical idols talked about in the Bible. Christians sometimes think that they are far removed from the sort of idolatry for which Israel was condemned. But the truth of the matter is that, while we (most of us) no longer construct physical idols in the form of statues to be worshiped, we are nevertheless often guilty of setting up other objects of worship in our lives.

We just don't always realize it, because we have trouble identifying what an idol looks like today.

## **What does an idol look like?**

Simply put, an idol is anything that pulls your attention away from pursuing God.

An idol can be a physical thing like property, it can be an intangible concept like wealth or fame, it can be a philosophy like self-reliance or atheism, it can be an activity or identity like sports or a club, it can even be a relationship with another person like your spouse or kids, or it can truly be another god like people worship in other religions.

Some things are idols for everyone, meaning that there is no way to incorporate those things into your life without it becoming an idol. This is the case with another religion.

Other things are not intrinsically idols for all people, but can become so when they work their way into our hearts in such a way that they become the focus of our desires.

Usually, the things that people idolize are good gifts that have taken on too much meaning in their lives. Often, the only way to identify these things is to ask the Holy Spirit to convict us of our idolatry.

But, when he does, we must also be willing to act – sometimes in radical ways – to remove the idols from our lives.

# Why it matters to identify and remove idols in our lives

Jesus was crystal clear that it is impossible to serve God, when our desires are for other things. Using the example of money, that great Idol of all cultures, he said,

*“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. (Matthew 6:24, NLT)”*

And money is just one example of the things which start out innocently enough, but can easily begin to consume our attention and wrestle our love away from God. When we begin to pursue these things instead of Jesus, we are guilty of idolatry, because we worship created things in place of our Creator.

## Removing Idols One at a Time

For a long time now, I have wrestled with the realization that I have had some budding idols in my life. Some things that often pull my attention away from Jesus and what he would have me hear and do. They seemed innocuous enough that, at first, I ignored the affect they were having on me.

It was only when I tried to give these things less of a footprint in my life that I fully realized just how destructive they have become. And now that I see those distractions have created fractured desires in me, the only thing I can do is to root them out and remove them from my

life one at a time.

For me, the biggest culprit in my life – the thing that distracts me from hearing God’s voice more often than anything else at this moment in time is social media. If you have been reading this site for long, you know this has been an [ongoing struggle](#) for me. It is just one of many contributing factors in the [distraction](#) and [busyness](#) people consume themselves with in our culture. It isn’t intrinsically an idol, but it is the one thing that has a grip on me personally.

So, it is time to let it go. After trying multiple ways of reducing my use of social media and failing, I’m convinced that I need to completely sever the ties, if I am ever to fully focus on where God wants to speak into my life.

As of yesterday, I no longer have profiles on Twitter and Facebook (the biggest problems for me). I don’t know if I will ever be back on these services. I may be, but only once I have removed its place of influence in my life. At the very least, I sense God telling me to give them up for the rest of this year. After that we will see.

My sincere hope is that, in these coming months, I will develop a deep desire for seeking intimacy with God and more meaningful relationships with people in my sphere of influence, rather than wasting the time God has given me on superficial friendships and the pursuit of meaning, through an online persona.

Please hear me, I am not making a prescription for other Christians. You must reflect on your own life and ask the Holy Spirit for guidance on which things are vying for more and

more of your attention. But I urge you to take seriously what the Spirit reveals to you. Letting go of things – even good things – that are pulling your desire away from God is a necessary part of living as a disciple of Jesus.

The only irony of this decision for me is that few people will probably ever see this post, because the vast majority of my website traffic comes from social media. It is one reason I struggled so hard with letting go. But now that I have let go of relevance I can embrace obscurity in the arms of my Lord.

I'd say that is a pretty good trade.

Jesus must become greater; we must become less.

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## **There Are Things a Pastor Cannot Do**

I became a pastor, because for quite some time I sensed a clear call from God to preach the gospel, teach scripture, lead and love God's people.

I knew pastoring would be difficult at the best of times, but it is a privilege and burden I am willing to bear, if Christ is with me.

The toughest part of pastoring (for me) is watching people

choose things other than God and his best for them, and subsequently miss out on the abundant life “hidden with Christ in God”. Like most pastors, I am a “fixer”. I want to solve problems for people. But God has not called me to fix people or solve their problems; he has called me to love and shepherd them.

The truth is, there are things a pastor can and cannot do. The sooner we embrace this, the sooner we can live fully into the call of God in our lives.

**I have recently come to terms with the following truths about pastoring a church.**

**1. A pastor cannot save people from their sin.** Only Jesus can do that. No matter how much I desire to see people cast aside the things that hinder them in their pursuit of God, I cannot take their burden of sin away. I must trust that work to Jesus.

**2. A pastor cannot force people to mature in Christ.** Only the Holy Spirit can do that. No matter how frustrated or heartbroken I am by Christians, who show no interest in growing in their faith or evidence of Christian maturity, I cannot make anyone mature. I must trust that work to the Holy Spirit.

**3. A pastor cannot make people brokenhearted for the lost.** Only the Father can do that. No matter how much I try to point out the plight of those living apart from Christ, or try to inspire compassion for the broken, I cannot break people’s hearts for them. I must trust that work to the Father, who himself seeks and saves the lost and broken.

**4. A pastor cannot give a church a missional (outward) focus.** Only God can do that. No matter how desperately I plead with people to put their faith into action outside the walls of our church, I cannot make them go where God is calling us. I must trust that work to God, who sends the workers out into the fields, which are ripe for a harvest.

**5. A pastor cannot change people.** And God won't change people, unless they are willing.

When I try to do these things, I unwittingly set myself up for failure and frustration, because I am reaching out to grasp things, which are not mine to begin with. They belong to God, and God alone. I can desire these things for the people under my care, but the work belongs to the Lord.

**So, what can a pastor, who hopes to see these things in the life of the church, actually do?**

**1. A pastor can pursue** his or her own spiritual growth and vitality, surrendering self to Christ.

**2. A pastor can urge** people toward faithfulness through preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction.

**3. A pastor can set an example** by loving the lost and the broken and inviting them into relationship with Jesus.

**4. A pastor can cast** a missional vision and invite others to

join together in Kingdom work.

## 5. A pastor can pray for people.

The only thing a pastor can really do is surrender his or her life to Jesus. The rest is up to God.

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# Your Productivity Isn't Your Problem

I don't typically write about things like productivity, although it is a topic that interests me. In fact, I do a lot of reading about productivity techniques, I'm a moderator of the [Productive Pastor group](#) on Facebook, and I've even done a couple of interviews for the [podcast](#) about productivity in ministry. I've spent significant energy trying to improve my own productivity and help others do the same.

The reason I haven't written much about it here, is because I try to focus my writing on spiritual issues. Things that affect the growth and maturity of everyday believers, some who serve in vocational ministry, some who don't. My goal is to work toward diagnosing the causes of spiritual malaise and encourage us on toward wholeness and health, through lives that are vibrantly spiritual and fully surrendered to the Holy Spirit.



I haven't written on productivity, because frankly, until recently I didn't realize that productivity, like almost everything else, is a spiritual issue.

I recently wrote an article about the [spiritual cost of distraction](#), where I confessed my own struggle with feeling constantly distracted by the many people and things vying for my attention, and [the toll it has taken](#) on me spiritually. Since writing that article, I have been on a personal journey of surrender and discovery. I have been asking God to remind me what the work he has called me to is actually supposed to look like, and how I can most faithfully accomplish that work, while also being a faithful Christian, husband, father, and friend.

I have been wrestling with the conflict between my own carnal desires to please people and be "successful" according to the world's standards, and God's desire to have my whole heart, even and especially when that leads to self-sacrifice, misunderstanding, and obscurity. As a result of this, I have had to begin looking at my work as a pastor and scholar, and especially my productivity, through a new lens.

## **Surrender Your Calendar**

The first major step I have had to take in my journey toward wholeness is to surrender my calendar to Christ. The writing of Eugene Peterson has convicted me deeply. He has shown me that my inability to effectively manage my own calendar is a spiritual issue. In the past, I have allowed other people, who often don't understand the unique work of pastoral ministry,

to define my priorities and how I will spend my time. And I have allowed unfair criticisms – such as the cliché and ludicrous, but often believed, idea that pastors only work a few hours a week and must have an easy life – to force me to justify myself through frenzied activities that have little to do with the ministry to which I am called.

I have come to realize that I cannot be trusted with my own calendar, but neither can I trust others with it. Only Christ has the knowledge and wisdom to guide my daily steps, and so I must surrender my calendar to him. I now pray about how I will spend my time each week, and I say “yes” or “no” to activities accordingly. And, though I do not always hear God clearly through the noise of my life, I believe my schedule now reflects Kingdom values far more often than earthly ones.

This change of pace naturally impacts my productivity, at least according to the conventions of society. Allowing God to have full control over my calendar at times makes me appear lazy, because I say no to even good opportunities when they don't align with God's priorities for me or my church. At times, I appear selfish, because I give my best hours of the day to reading scripture, prayer, and writing. Sometimes, I appear a bit more aloof or distant, because I don't give everyone equal amounts of time and attention.

But the spiritual benefit of handing God my calendar and asking him to fill it with the things he wants for me has been tangible. This one single act has given me freedom from the fear of public opinion about my work, and has helped me to develop the fortitude to say no to spiritual distractions. It has also given me the space to begin doing things I should have been doing all along, but found myself incapable of.

Things like Sabbath and evenings at home with my wife and children.

Surrendering my calendar has also given me space to begin reflecting deeply about the work of ministry, and which types of activities are the very best things I can spend my life doing. As a result, I have been reading widely about the need for [Deep Work](#), the healthy priorities of [Essentialism](#), the challenge of leading well in a culture that increasingly promotes [A Failure of Nerve](#) among its leaders, and how to establish healthy [Boundaries](#) that will ensure my own spiritual, emotional, and physical health, even as I encourage these same things in those to whom I minister.

All of this has led me to the conclusion that productivity is not our problem. And while I am all for discovering and utilizing techniques and tools that will increase our ability to do our work well and in a timely fashion, and presumably free up more time for non-work pursuits, increasing our productivity will not heal the disease with which we have all been infected.

Our real problem isn't a lack of productivity. Our real problem – and I cannot stress enough that it is a spiritual problem – is busyness. And the only solution to this disease is surrendering our lives *completely* to the care of the Great Physician.

**Our real problem isn't productivity; our real problem is that we aren't saying "yes" to God when and where it counts, because we are too busy saying "yes" to everyone and**

**everything else.**

If you are struggling with productivity or focus or margin in your life, I want to encourage you to consider that the problem might be a spiritual one.

*Dream with me for a moment. What would your schedule look like if you could do anything you want with your time? Now, what do you think it would look like if you gave complete control of your calendar to Christ? Are there things you are doing that would embarrass you in a calendar review with Jesus? Are the things you know he would want you to do that you don't currently, because you are too busy? Let me know your thoughts in the comment section below.*

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## **The Spiritual Cost Of Distraction**

I have wrestled with distraction my whole life. It has taken a number of different forms over the years and has been spurred on by a wide variety of catalysts.

Sometimes we can't help but become distracted by significant events or relationships in our lives, but more often distraction seems to be a choice. We choose to fill our waking hours with more commitments, hobbies, adventures, and chores than a human being is capable of managing while maintaining any significant amount of focus.

Our modern era of digital connectivity has only made things worse by putting a huge number of available distractions in the palms of our hands. I am still quite often stunned by the realization that many of us are [missing the world around us](#), because we are either living in a virtual reality or viewing real life through screens and devices.

Just this last weekend, my wife and I had the privilege of joining some friends on a short vacation to Disneyland in California. I was honestly amazed by the number of people who walked around with their eyes glued to their phones. I even caught myself doing it a couple of times, as I hurried to take pictures of what I was experiencing, rather than focusing on the experience itself.

If you are a regular reader then you know that I have been struggling for some time with the current culture of distraction. I have written previously about my concerns over [the addictiveness of Social Media](#), and [my own struggle](#) to maintain a balance in ministry and my family is partly due to this unwritten expectation that we should always be available to the requests and needs of others.

I have made some attempts to meter my connectivity in the past, and have argued [why I think this is important](#), especially for Christians. But I have struggled to find the balance that I desire. The distractions, especially of Social Media, seem to always creep back in over time.

## **Everything is Spiritual**

What I have come to believe more earnestly than ever, is that

distraction is really a spiritual issue, as well as an issue of productivity or focus. When we constantly seek the small hit of dopamine we get from apps that are engineered to distract us with likes and comments, it shows that we are trying (at some level) to fill a hole inside.

We show that we are uncomfortable with the silence and boredom and grittiness of the real lives we are called to live in the real world.

I am increasingly weary of being connected all of the time. And I've been doing some reading that talks about simplicity, the importance of [Deep Work](#), and what it means to make space for God to take up residence in our lives.

And the more I think on these things, the more I desire to live an unhurried life; one in which I set clear boundaries and practice the fine art of saying "no", even to good opportunities. Not out of laziness, but because I truly believe that we cannot hear God speak to us clearly, when we live distracted lives.

One of the greatest spiritual challenges Christians in America face today is becoming present enough and silent enough that we can experience the abundant life that God has promised us, by experiencing God himself.

If we are constantly distracting ourselves by created things when we are awake, then how can we ever learn to focus enough to hear the still, small voice of our Creator?

## Quitting is hard, but it may be necessary

The fact that I have Googled “quitting social media” and similar queries dozens of times in the last three years should tell you how hard it is to actually pull the trigger on making changes, especially to online connectivity. I’ve had a bit more success with saying no to real-world commitments recently, but I still struggle with letting go of online distractions completely.

I still haven’t figured out how to do what I know is best, which is to completely detach myself from those things I find most distracting like Social Media, email, entertainment, and the like. But until I do, I believe I will continue to struggle with not only physical, mental, and emotional distractions, but also spiritual ones.

The question I keep asking myself is this. What is the cost of waiting to make a change?

*Do you find yourself in a frequently distracted state? Have you thought about the spiritual costs? What are you doing to address this in your life? Leave a comment and let me know.*

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## Self-Care Isn't Selfish

This year has been a difficult one for me. It started out with an overwhelming workload last December that culminated in near burnout at the start of this fall. It led to [some spiritual dissatisfaction](#), some frustration with the shape and progress

of my leadership efforts, and some miscommunication/misunderstandings with members of my church.

For the longest time, I simply stopped taking care of myself. I was working far too many hours, I wasn't taking days off, I wasn't engaging in fun activities to recharge my batteries, and I wasn't present with my family, because even when I was physically there I was mentally elsewhere.

As a result, I began to spiral down into a mild depression late in the summer, and I began to question whether or not I was making a difference or whether I was wasting my efforts. I became cynical, bitter, and hopeless. And despite [my super optimistic comments](#) during my first season of pastoral ministry, I was beginning to feel the strain and desperation that so many of my clergy colleagues have talked about, but which I did not understand myself until it was almost too late.

To those of you from the church I serve who are reading this, and maybe hearing about it for the first time, I urge you to pray regularly for me and my family. The pressures and responsibilities of pastoral leadership are very real. I hope you will not be turned off by my honesty, because above all we are called by Christ to embody truth. Without it, there can be no healing from our wounds or sin. There is nothing that anyone at our church did to foster the sense of burnout I felt coming on me; it was purely a product of too many irons in the fire coupled with the spiritual and emotional pressures of pastoral ministry.



Had it not been for my strong family support and the love of my congregation I don't know if I would be out of the woods yet. Because of their support I have had time to seek God through prayer and scripture and rest, which has led me to some real soul-searching. I began to re-evaluate what the ministry to which I am called should look like, and I began taking steps to pull back in areas that do not match that picture.

I have since begun the painful process of saying no to good opportunities and good people, so that I can become a better pastor to my congregation and a better husband and father to my family. This inevitably leads to personal conflict and hurt feelings from those who don't understand the change, or who might feel that my "no" is a personal rejection. But I am finding newfound freedom by pursuing the things God has laid on my heart as my first priority.

Though I still fail more frequently than I would like, I am also working hard to create space for real Sabbath rest. Because the average person does not understand what a pastor does from week to week, most people will never ask their pastor if he or she is taking sufficient time to rest or to be with family. It is always assumed that we have plenty of time to spare. But this couldn't be farther from the truth. Pastors are as prone as any professional to workaholism, maybe more so, because we are "always on", and our work also encompasses our personal life.

There are many times when my one day off each week is interrupted by a church event or pastoral care emergency. There are many evenings when my time with family is cut short by calls or text messages from church members that require me

to put my "work" hat back on.

Even when I am out having fun with my family I am the pastor. Even when we are having a meal with friends from church, I am the pastor. When I go to the grocery store, or fill my car with gas, or laugh at a joke, or forget to wave at someone from church, I am the pastor. And every action or non-action is interpreted by those who know me in the light of my role in ministry. I do not consider this a negative thing. It is simply a fact. There are many blessings that come from this fact, but there are also many drawbacks. It is no wonder that so many of us in ministry of any sort find it hard to maintain a healthy balance.

Nevertheless, I am slowly, but surely, beginning to heal. I am realizing that my own expectations are often far higher and more burdensome than the expectations of God, my family, or my congregation. And I am learning to let go of the illusion of control. Thanks be to God!

All of this may sound a little bit selfish. Why am I thinking so much about myself and how things affect me? The reason is because none of us can help others, when we are deeply wounded ourselves. Like the safety presentations before every flight in America will tell you, you must put your own oxygen mask on first and then assist others, or you will soon be no good to anyone.

We may or may not have a crisis brewing among clergy, where burnout is becoming a commonplace occurrence. I just know that I was nearing a crisis point personally, until a few short

weeks ago. I am still not fully recovered, but I have hope that I will get back to being 100% at some point in the future.

The antidote to burnout in pastoral ministry is not delegation, or leadership training, or personal retreats. I am convinced the solution can only be found through the deep and abiding presence of Christ. And we cannot experience that depth of relationship, until we allow God to orient our lives and priorities.

The closer I draw to Christ, the more I see his desires for me. They are far simpler and far less grandiose than I have sometimes made them out to be. I believe God wants for me to focus on my relationship with him first, and then out of the abundance of that relationship to love my family and those to whom I minister.

Pastors, we have got to start taking a long, hard look at ourselves. We have got to begin focusing on God's desires for us as his children first, and then figure out how that plays out in our families and ministry. I listened to an interview with N.T. Wright this week on the [200Churches podcast](#), where he summarized so clearly what our main pursuits should be.

**Learn to pray. Learn to read the Bible. Learn to love people.**

If we learn to do those three things, I have to believe we will begin to see less pastoral burnout and more joyful servants.

In the coming weeks, I will spend some time thinking and writing about spiritual self-care. I want to encourage you, whether you are a ministry leader or not, to begin thinking seriously about what it looks like to care for your soul. I will also feature some writing and resources from others, who can help guide us all in the process of growing spiritually stronger.

I haven't figured it all out yet. So, in the meantime, please pray for me and my family and all those who serve in the ministry of Jesus' church.