

Deuteronomy 5:6–10 (NIV)

⁶“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

⁷“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁸“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. ⁹You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Psalms 86:11 (NIV)

Teach me your way, LORD,
that I may rely on your faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.

2 Kings 17:35–41 (NIV)

³⁵When the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites, he commanded them: “Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them, serve them or sacrifice to them. ³⁶But the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship. To him you shall bow down and to him offer sacrifices.

³⁷You must always be careful to keep the decrees and regulations, the laws and commands he wrote for you. Do not worship other gods. ³⁸Do not forget the covenant I have made with you, and do not worship other gods. ³⁹Rather, worship the LORD your God; it is he who will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies.”

⁴⁰They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. ⁴¹Even while these people were worshipping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did.

Ezekiel 11:17–20 (NIV)

¹⁷“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’ ¹⁸“They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. ¹⁹I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

The question is simple: what “shiny gods” compete with God to come first in our lives?

Quite some years ago, the *Harvard Business Review* ran an essay that has always stuck with me. Entitled, “Focus or Falter,” it was written by a couple of Harvard Business School professors who concentrated on management in the service industries. Their point was pretty simple – strengthen your business by segmenting your potential customer base and then focusing relentlessly on the segment that you can serve better than anyone else.

The simple adage “focus or falter” probably rings true with most us. It is so easy for us to become scattered, spending our days chasing one new thing after another. We run around looking for the latest trend, or the new gizmo that will make us happy, or the new friend who doesn’t yet know the “real me.” None of these really satisfy us yet we keep up our frantic pace.

So, here's the question – on what or whom is your life focused? What or who comes first? There are three ways you could answer this question:

1. The answer that is for public consumption.
2. The answer you tell yourself in the privacy of your own room.
3. What an alien from Mars would conclude after following you around 24/7 for a couple of weeks.

What I'm interested in, of course, is the third answer. What *really* comes first in your life, as shown in what you actually *do*? What is the passion that gets you up in the morning? Who or what gets your heart? Your family, your job (be honest here, remember the alien), the golf course, your hobby, your super-fantastic HD giant screen with 7.1 surround sound, your smartphone, and on and on the list goes. It is so easy for any or all of these to become idols – yes, golden calves of one sort or another. Sure, it may seem odd or even offensive to talk about one's family as an idol, but even our families are gifts from God. And our first praise must be for the giver, before the gift.

In his book, *shiny gods: Finding Freedom from Things That Distract Us*, Rev. Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg UMC, writes that an idol is

“anything, or anyone, that receives the primary focus of my energy or resources, which should first belong to God. The Bible calls this having a divided heart. Instead of making it our primary life passion to worship the Lord our God and to serve only him, we begin to separate our spiritual life from the practical aspects of life. We use our idols, instead of God, to provide identity or meaning in our lives. This is especially easy to do when those idols are positive things, or even people we love. The danger is that even our virtues can become vices—or idols— if they are not directed toward God.”

Rev. Slaughter sought some help from friends in better recognizing the idols that tempt us all. He wrote:

Recently I asked my Facebook friends, “What idols do you wrestle with in your life?” What I discovered was that almost all our idols are really good gifts from God to which we assign a wrong priority. One person said the idol she struggles with most is her husband and children— constantly placing their interests above God's interests. Isn't that easy to do? Relationships are a gift from God. But what happens when we begin to worship the gift instead of the giver?

Another friend named food as an idol. What an incredible gift from God! I mean, if all we needed were nutrition, then God could have come up with some kind of powder to mix with water, like what the astronauts used in the 1960s. I always note the diversity of God's provision when I walk through the produce department of the grocery store. Talk about God's candy! Bananas, apples, grapes, strawberries— God came up with all this good stuff. But what happens when we begin to worship the gift instead of the giver? Food can become an addiction.

Think about sex, another great gift from God! If all God wanted was procreation, he could have come up with something like mixing earwax on a cotton swab, right? Instead he made this incredible, bonding, mystical experience between a husband and wife. Once again, when we begin to worship the gift over the giver, it can become an addiction.

I wrestle with the idol of material possessions. I spend too much money on clothes. And every time I pass a new Camaro convertible, I want one! I don't like the hard top; I want a convertible. It takes me back to 1968. I say to my wife Carolyn, “I would love one of those.” But if I got one, I'm afraid that for much of the year it would just be a toy in my garage. Camaros don't handle well in snow. I have a friend who owns a Mustang convertible in Kansas. He has to keep an old Jeep around to use in winter.

Technology is another idol I wrestle with. I love anything with an “i” in it. I have the iPhone, and it is great. Want to see my grandkids' pictures? They are on my phone. I have an iPad. I love the Internet and Facebook— all the technology gadgets.

I confess that I struggle with materialism, but I am not alone. Many of us create a god in the image of possessions, values, and traditions we have brought with us from the slavery of the past. We easily hook back into materialism, creating a god who serves our materialistic interests. It's called "prosperity theology." Have you heard of it? Name it and claim it. Blab it and grab it.

We also attempt to serve a god based on our political traditions. How many of us, if we are Democrat or Republican, make God a member of our party? We create a god in the image of our values.

Another Facebook friend said her idol is planning out her own life. I constantly hear from recent college graduates about their future plans. They say things like, "Pastor Mike, I am graduating from college this year in engineering and already have a job with a contractor at the Air Force base. I am getting married next June. How can I know God's will for my life?" I respond, "It doesn't sound like you want to know God's will; you want to know how God can bless your will."

Slaughter's list is a good start, but if you are like me, seeing my life's choices as potential idols takes a bit of work. Here is an exercise. Read the following list and substitute the word "work" (a very common American idol) everywhere there is an "X":

- X sustains me
- X encourages me
- X comforts me
- X lifts me up
- X strengthens me
- X is with me everywhere

You might try "technology" or "food" or whatever other else in your life might be the primary focus of your time and resources.

Now go back to the list and substitute "God." There are many verbs we associate with God that, in truth, we more readily apply to success or wealth or our possessions or any of a host of things that we feel sustain us, encourage us, and so on. God sometimes just seems so darn remote.

But look again at the list. What's missing? How about:

- X loves me
- X forgives me

I'm sure that even Steve Jobs would have said that his incredible high-tech toys and gizmos never "loved" him or "forgave him." It is the intensely *personal* nature of love and forgiveness that is missing from work, success, or any of the other idols that get the bulk of our attention, time, and money. Eugene Peterson wrote:

"An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God derelationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe "getting to" is the better phrase) receive or give love, and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature."

We make idols of anything and everything because we begin to imagine that they provide us with what we think we most need. And of course, they can't. We were created to worship the one who made us. It is God who is to be the primary focus of our energy and resources. In this, we are created to have an undivided heart. It is to our own loss that so many of our hearts seem so divided as to be like confetti that blows where the wind sends it, chasing one disappointment after another, pursuing that which leaves us empty, rather than pursuing the one who fills us.

The undivided heart

The biblical perspective is pretty straightforward – it is God who is to come first, to be our primary focus. Take a look again at the passages from Psalm 86 and the prophet Ezekiel. The Psalm calls us to have undivided hearts; Ezekiel brings God’s promise that such hearts will be ours, indeed, *are* ours – if we only listen and let the Spirit lead us to ever-deeper devotion to the Lord God.

So many Christians desire to have a deeper and more intimate relationship with God, even while their hearts remain divided. There are almost 7,000 members of St. Andrew. If that alien followed each of us around, how many of us would the alien say truly demonstrate that God is the primary focus of our energies, our time, and our resources?

In closing, take a moment to read these verses by Charles Wesley, who lived more than three hundred years, yet understood all too well the temptation to divide his heart, reserving a portion for God, but only a portion. Is God truly your one desire?

Let earth no more my heart divide
With Christ may I be crucified,
To Thee with my whole soul aspire;
Dead to the world, and all its toys,
Its idle pomp, and fading joys,
Be Thou alone my one desire.

Be Thou my joy; be Thou my dread;
In battle cover Thou my head,
Nor earth nor hell so shall I fear:
So shall I turn my steady face
Want, pain defy, enjoy disgrace,
Glory in dissolution near.

My will be swallow’d up in Thee:
Light in Thy light still may I see,
Beholding Thee with open face;
Call’d the full power of faith to prove,
Let all my hallow’d heart be love,
And all my spotless life be praise.

by Charles Wesley

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Our Connection Groups are meeting during this series and viewing videos by Rev. Mike Slaughter, the author of *shiny gods: Finding Freedom from Things That Distract Us*. Here a few questions Rev. Pam White wrote to guide the discussions of the Connection Groups:

1. Slaughter’s definition of an idol is “anything, or anyone, that receives the primary focus of my energy or resources, which should first belong to God.” The Bible calls this having a divided heart.
 - Under this definition, what are some things that are idols in your life?
 - Are all of these things “negative” in and of themselves?
2. Slaughter says that even “God’s beautiful gifts to us can become idols when we assign to them a wrong priority.”
 - What are some examples of God’s gifts that we start to idolize?
 - How is this detrimental?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 20 The Ten Commandments and a warning against idols.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 86 A psalm of David; A prayer for God's help</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 44:6-23 Choose the Lord God, not idols</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 8 Paul advises the Corinthian Christians about the consumption of meat that has been offered in sacrifice to idols.</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 3:20-34 Jesus makes it clear that God must come first – even before families.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Saints and Sinners: True and Not-So-True Stories of the Pope
An entertaining and enlightening history of the Papacy, from Peter to Gregory to Joan(?) to Francis

Next week – beginning a new series:

Everyday Theology: from the checkout line to the funeral home

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
