

A Head on a Platter

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[0 : 00] We shall pray. Lord our God, help us to search our hearts tonight in light of your word and to be mindful of the people that we fear and of the temptations we have to be ashamed and to not suffer as your servant John did.

And so, by your Spirit, give us a new confidence in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen. Friends, how many gods do you believe in?

How many little g gods do you believe in, I mean? We know there's only one God, but actually there are many little g gods. You might believe in five or six or maybe 20 little g gods.

Because what you worship is your God. And so I've got some questions on a slide for the screen. Here's a good test of if something has become your God, your little g God.

Your God is what you most highly esteem, what we are most mindful of, what we aim for, what takes up all our time and resolve, what we most love and adore, what we most fear losing, what we most desire and enjoy, what we are most zealous for, and what we are most grateful for.

[1 : 15] If you test your hearts, you might find that there are things that fit those categories that aren't the living and true God. You have a little g God in your life, in your heart.

You have an idol that you are worshipping. We can kill that now. See, even the atheist religiously worships his gods.

The atheist gods will be the things that he lives for, that he lives to please. It might be his cleverness or his independence. It could just be the worship of his self-pride.

That is his little g God. He serves and worships the gods of independence dutifully and, I think, pitifully. Now, to become a Christian means to turn from all false gods, to turn from idols, to serve Christ alone as Lord.

We know that's what being a Christian is. To be forgiven for serving those false idols and to turn to the living and true God, to his Son, the Lord Jesus. But just as atheists can worship gods without acknowledging or even realising it, I think that monotheists can also worship gods without realising it.

[2 : 37] In the Christian life, I think false gods have a way of sneaking into our homes and sneaking into our hearts. And we may not even realise that we have these idols.

Now, when I say idol, we've got to just clarify what we mean. Because when it comes to physical statues that people worship, we're pretty clear on that, that that's wrong.

That's a man-made thing that we vote as the birds vote with the marks they leave on such statues. We think they're rubbish. And we think you shouldn't leave baskets of fruit at such a statue of worship or hope in such an idol.

But the trouble is, that's not what the Bible means by idol all of the time. Idols can be invisible. Idols can come out of nowhere and we don't even see them.

And yet, they take root in our hearts and we end up living for idols that are invisible. And they insult the true God. There's such an insult to the God that we know.

- [3 : 44] Now, here's how you know that you've got these idols. You know they're there when they're attacked. When people's idols are attacked, the people get rattled.
- They get angry. You know, they get rattled. They arc up. They don't even know why they're getting angry. It's because you've attacked their secret idol. So, in short, our gods or idols are the things that we love, that we trust, that we obey, that aren't Jesus.
- See, an example of this dynamic of people arcing up when the idol's questioned is a very easy example. If you challenge someone who prays to Mary or has this sort of radical devotion to the mythical Virgin Mary, and you say, well, that's an idol, they will get very angry at you.
- They'll be offended because they'll be rattled because you have struck at the heart of their idol. You know, their idols demand a kind of enslavement and a pitiful kind of enslavement that makes people angry and prickly when we question them.
- Another example might be some people in our society worship sex. So, they live for, they worship, or their hope is in the next sexual encounter.
- [5 : 02] Their god is sexual gratification. So, in this model, pornography is a kind of religious idolatry. Now, if you try questioning the gods of pornography today, you will be called bigoted.
- You'll be called a kind of right-wing, censoring, fascist. People will arc up because you have offended their idol. And they will attack you for attacking their idol.
- They'll be rattled. Another example is greed. Greed, we know from Colossians 3, is a form of idolatry. It's a religious idolatry.
- And you can be a Christian and let the gods of greed into your heart. You won't know that you're worshipping greed. All you'll know is that you have some very good theological reasons to justify the stuff you're buying and the comfort you have.
- But when someone challenges your greed and suggests to you that you are greedy, you'll get angry. You'll say, how dare you judge me for what I do with my money? You know, you'll arc up because your idol has been rattled.
- [6 : 14] And your idol demands subservience and protection. Now, friends, today we're going to see Jesus get some opposition.
- And behind that are people's idolatry. And what we're going to try and do is just pick up what might the idols be behind the objections to Jesus. And I'll be honest with you, some of this is speculative.
- And you might see some idols that I don't see, maybe because they're in my heart. And so we need to kind of have this conversation after church. Are they the only idols that we see? Are there other idols that we don't see that produce the opposition that Jesus gets?
- We'll start with Jesus going to his hometown in chapter 13. He came to his hometown, began to do the Messiah thing. Teach in the synagogue, do works of power, proclaim the kingdom, call for faith and repentance.
- And the people there were astounded and said, Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is this not the carpenter's son?
- [7 : 18] Is this not his mother Mary like she just lives down the road? How could this guy do that? And are not his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? That's fascinating, by the way, for just the blast, the idol of the Virgin Mary, that we have Jesus.
- He's got these four brothers. And it says, we know his sisters. They come to this synagogue. And so, you know, like in any biblical and godly marriage, Mary and Joseph must have had lots of sex if they've got a big family.
- And so there's no Virgin Mary here. And the people, what is driving them? What is driving them to say, who is this guy? We're not going to believe in him.

We know him. He's not a prophet. What kind of idol would make someone arc up like that in Jesus' hometown? Well, I wonder if the idol here, there's a couple.

I wonder if one is envy. Envy is a massive idol, I think, in our hearts too, that we're tempted by. Paul Barker said the other day in our Growing Leaders course, and this is very true, he said, there's something in our sinful human heart that feels pain whenever anyone else is successful.

[8 : 38] Whenever anyone else is successful, we feel pain. That's a horrible thing. That shows that we have the idol of envy. We are tempted to worship that idol. You know, the people in Jesus' hometown, he's a scandal to them.

They take offense at him. Who is this guy? He's just one of us. There's no way he could be a prophet. If anyone's going to be a prophet from this hometown, it would be me. It can't be him.

He's just a carpenter's son. And so I think there is a little bit of an idol there of envy. Jesus had said earlier in Matthew, blessed is anyone who doesn't take offense at me.

And by that he meant, blessed is anyone that when I confront them, they are not so rattled by their idols that they reject me and I become an offense.

That's exactly what these people do. They're rattled and Jesus is a scandal to them. What about your heart? Are you driven by envy?

[9 : 35] Do you feel pain when other Christians are successful or other people are successful? Are you jealous that other people are getting things that you want?

Does that make you angry? Are you worshipping at the foot? Are you laying baskets at the foot of the God called envy? Now I think there's a deeper idol here as well.

And it's another common idol today. When Jesus meets resistance in his hometown, he's butting up against the God of cynicism.

Or as he puts it, it's the idol of unbelief. So he says, Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.

And he did not do him any deeds of power there because of their unbelief. And so they're laying baskets of fruit, so to speak, at the foot of the idol called unbelief or cynicism.

[10 : 39] That's a common idol around today. There are non-Christians who nurture unbelief in their heart. They actually enjoy rejecting belief in God.

They say, There's no way I'm going to believe. It's all rubbish. And you can almost hear them preaching to themselves in their mind. I'm never going to believe that.

What crap they believe, those Christians. Such people aren't free thinkers. They've actually made a commitment to worship the God of cynicism.

To worship unbelief. I've met some very honest atheists who, at the end of a long kind of discussion, if you just say to them, What would convince you?

Would anything convince you to believe in God? And they'll honestly say, No. Nothing will convince me. In effect, they're saying, I'm committed to unbelief. And they will be, of course, until God's Holy Spirit smashes that idol.

[11 : 41] But I think also in our lives as Christians, the same spirit of unbelief, the same idol can creep in. Have you ever thought about this? Are you tempted by unbelief?

Now, how can you worship Jesus as a Christian and yet have worship on the side unbelief? Well, it works like this. Why don't you pray? Why don't you depend on God more in prayer?

Because probably, deep down though, you might not really think about it like this way. You actually don't believe God answers it. You actually have given in to the God of unbelief.

You don't think God will answer your prayer. That's really why you don't pray. Why don't you talk about Jesus more with your non-Christian friends?

Because deep down you think, they're not going to listen to me. God's not going to use me. You've given in to the idol of unbelief. You think, I'm not going to be that guy who gets a friend to the annual dinner or leads someone to Christ.

[12 : 46] That's not going to be me. And you're actually worshipping the idol of unbelief. Now, the sad thing is, it's a terrible kind of idolatry that those who know the living God actually serve the little God of unbelief on the side.

God actually does answer prayer. God actually does use any Christian to share the faith. The difference between you and the Christian who is leading people to Christ is that they're believing God for it.

And so they're going for it. And God is using them. That's the only difference. And so the sad thing is, part of the discipline that God gives to such people is that he doesn't work through them.

And that ends up reinforcing their idol of unbelief. And that's what happens here. Jesus says, you know, he did not do many deeds of power there because of their unbelief.

He could have, but he didn't because why should he? They're worshipping another idol. Friends, test your hearts. Search for signs of unbelief in your life.

[14 : 02] Look for where you're not actually trusting God to be God. Where are you not trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can take care of you, say, if you're single?

Are you trusting that God can take care of you if you're going to be single long term? Are you trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can break the power of an addictive sin?

Or are you resigned to that sin? Unbelieving in God. You know, are you believing that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can use you to share the gospel, to talk about Jesus?

It's a lot easier for God to get someone to church than to raise Jesus from the dead. But we know he's raised him from the dead. So let's believe in him. Now we move from Jesus' hometown to the great palace of Herod, the ruler.

And this is a real idol factory. They are coming out here in all shapes and sizes. Now the real idol factory is actually not Herod's palace.

[15 : 07] It's Herod's heart. Just as my heart is an idol factory and your heart is as well. And I think the gods that Herod worshipped are gods that we are tempted by that may have actually planted root in your heart.

So let's see what they were. Chapter 14, verse 1 and 2. At that time, Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus and he said to his servants, This is John the Baptist.

He has been raised from the dead. For this reason, these powers are at work in this new guy. It's John the Baptist risen. One of the dynamics of idolatry that I've mentioned already is that when you attack someone's idol, they get rattled.

Now another dynamic of idolatry is that idols make you very fearful and very superstitious. That's basically where Herod is at. He's got a belief in the resurrection.

He's probably got that belief from Pharisees. It's good to see that they're good for something. They were the main defenders of a belief in resurrection in the first century. But he somehow superstitiously combined a belief in resurrection with his guilt and fear that he had killed John the Baptist and John the Baptist is coming back to get him.

[16 : 30] So Herod is very, very superstitious. Now your idols will do the same thing to you. They will make you very superstitious and control you by fear.

I mentioned earlier about trusting God in singleness, in adult singleness. I had a close Christian friend. She was so, I think, really obsessed by finding a marriage partner.

It had become an idol for her. She was not trusting God to take care of her. And in her desperation, her idolatry led her to superstition and she consulted a clairvoyant and paid \$200 or something for an hour with a one-on-one clairvoyant who, of course, told her everything she wanted to hear and she even got a tape of it.

And that's very sad that a Christian would do that. She went out searching, serving other gods rather than trusting the God who has promised her, I will never leave you, I will never forsake you.

Friends, that is the idol of unbelief turning you to be superstitious like Herod is. Matthew goes on, tells us what had happened.

[17 : 49] For Herod had arrested John, bound him and put him in prison on account of a woman called Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Now they're all kind of named Herod or Herodias because of Herod the Great who had lived a generation earlier, who had been just a really important influence in Roman history.

He's the guy who had rebuilt the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and so Herod the Tetrarch is one of the children of Herod the Great and he's married to his brother Philip's wife, his half-brother Philip's wife.

And I think Herodias apparently was also related to the great King Herod as well. She was his granddaughter by another child. So it's all very incestuous and dodgy.

And John had said, King Herod, it is not lawful for you to have her as your wife. John the Baptist came preaching repentance, the last great prophet of the Old Covenant.

And he said it like it was. And he told King Herod, it's not lawful for you to have her as your wife. If you want to enter the kingdom of God, that's one of the things you're going to have to repent of. King Herod got rattled because his idols had been attacked.

[19 : 11] He got rattled, puts John in jail. He wants to kill him. He's afraid to because of what people would think. He's a politician. And he's got a few other idols in there that we'll get to.

Just think about how this works, friends. Would you say this to someone today? Now, would you say to someone, you're not in a lawful relationship. You're just living with that woman and she's married to that guy.

You're not in a lawful relationship according to God's standards. If you said that to someone, they'd get very angry at you, wouldn't they? They wouldn't want to befriend. They'd swear at you.

Why? Because you've attacked their idol and they'd get rattled. What's the idol? Sexual freedom. It's one of the great idols of our society that no one can question anyone else's sexual activity.

So I think sexual autonomy is actually a bigger idol today than sexual pleasure. Just the fact that people are claiming this right to sexual autonomy, it's an idol that people are leaving baskets of fruit before.

[20 : 20] They're worshipping it. They're living for it. They're mindful of it. If you tell someone that, you know, we've got clear commands in the Bible that sex is for one man and one woman for life and that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7.39 that Christians should marry only in the Lord, that is, other Christians.

If you speak up about it, people will be rattled and angry at you for attacking the God of sexual autonomy. It's exactly what happened to Herod and John the Baptist.

Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, it was a great birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company.

Presume it's some kind of sensual exotic dance, if not erotic. This is a Roman party. This is worse than Big Brother. Herod's a Christian. And Herod's so pleased, and I think so drunk, that he promised her on oath to give her whatever she wanted.

Prompted by her mother, who of course is even more threatened by John the Baptist, why did she switch from Philip to Herod the Tetrarch? Because of her own lust for power.

[21 : 40] She's marrying up the chain. And so, you know, she's threatened by this guy, which was in her daughter's ear. Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.

The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guest. He commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison. The head was brought on a platter, given to the girl who brought it to her mother.

I would watch Big Brother if it was that bad. His disciples came and took the body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. A lot of idols going on here. We've got Herod getting drunk.

It's a party. The Romans has worshipped excess. You know, just indulging the senses, overflowing them just with food and drink and sex. And that's going on.

There are idols here of being a politician, of fearing the crowd. There's his wife's own idols to kind of get her power.

[22 : 39] Power is a very strong idol. But what is Herod's main idol? I think Herod's main idol is people-pleasing.

His main God is saving his own face. Why does he get John the Baptist killed? Because of the stupid oaths he made in front of these people at a party.

And he doesn't want to be embarrassed or lose face or lose credibility. You know, the weak men, what do weak men fear? They fear being shown up as weak. And so out of fear of that, out of worshipping the idol of saving face, John the Baptist is killed.

This is sort of a bad pun, but it might help you just remember this during the week. In a Christian life, you have to choose between saving faith and saving face.

Because those things, you cannot have both and be a Christian who serves Jesus seven days a week. There are times when being a Christian is going to mean losing your reputation or being insulted or being embarrassed for what you believe and people mocking you.

[23 : 52] People will dismiss you. They'll isolate you for your convictions. So when it comes to the point of decision in your life this week, which God will you serve? The Lord Jesus Christ or the God of saving your face or people-pleasing or reputation?

You know, who will your God be when crunch comes to crunch? You can't just worship Jesus in here and then worship those other gods out there. I think being obsessed with what people think of you is a powerful idol.

It stops many becoming Christians, doesn't it? People don't want to become Christians because they know that it's going to displease all their friends and family and they're going to be put to shame for it so they don't become Christians.

And it creeps into our hearts too, I think. Into my heart. Probably into your heart. It stops us publicly obeying Christ, doing things out of love for Him because we're most mindful of what do people think of us?

What did He say about me? What did so-and-so put in that email about me? This is what we're obsessed by. It shows that we have an idol. If you give in to this God, by the way, I warn you, if you give in to the God of people-pleasing, it will suck the joy out of your life.

[25 : 12] You'll never be happy. There will always be people who don't like you and you will never really know what people are saying about you behind your back. You'll be forever curious and you'll never ever be happy, never ever be content.

It's one of the worst idols to seek the approval of men. So just think about where we are now, friends, in this story. All because of this gutless, weak, idol-worshipping man called Herod who was trying to save face at a stupid party, we have, in the death of John the Baptist, the end of the Old Covenant.

Isn't that tragic? I mean, think of what a glorious thing the Old Covenant was. You know, it's 2,000 years of salvation, history of God with His people, a covenant with Abraham, a promise that descendants would be like grains of sand on the seashore, a great exodus out of Egypt, a glorious rescue of over a million people, the giving of God's law, His presence at Sinai, the tablets of stone written by the finger of God.

Wonderful stuff. The temple of God's presence. Jerusalem at its best, at the center of the world. Its leaders, King David, King Solomon. The wisest people flocking to them for their wisdom.

You know, this great Old Covenant that gave us the greatest songs of all time, the Psalms. This amazing kingdom ends at a party with a drunk guy being bussed around by his slutty wife.

[27 : 01] The greatest kingdom the world has seen ended by a gutless and bloodthirsty king. It's so tragic. And yet, friends, in this event, the gospel is actually foreshadowed, isn't it?

John's job was to prepare the way for Christ in more ways than one. In more than just sermons, he prepared the way for Christ in his death. A more glorious kingdom will come through a worse death than at a party like this.

Jesus' death will be more insulting, more bloodthirsty. John the Baptist passes the baton to Jesus and he has a similarly humiliating death.

Jesus will go to the cross under Herod, under Pontius Pilate, rejected by all. All will want him dead as they worship every false god, every rattled idol, just to get rid of him.

In doing so, Jesus' death brings in a more glorious kingdom than the Old Covenant. A kingdom in which, by the way, the least is greater than John.

[28 : 15] Friends, let's think about this. So much of the Christian life is invisible, isn't it? So much is invisible. I serve Jesus. Where is he?

I can't see him. He's at God's right hand. That takes both believing God's promise, faith, and I think a fair amount of imagination in a sense to just have the eyes of faith to see Jesus there at God's right hand and to serve him.

Idols. I can't see the idols in my life. You can't see them. Yet they are there. They are tempting you. They are dragging you down. They are controlling your decision making and they are invisible.

No wonder that we need church. No wonder that we need kind of visible sacraments. We need things to, we need each other to spur each other on. The contrast between the visible and the invisible are stark.

Jesus looks weak. Looks so weak. He's rejected in his hometown. What a loser. Yet we know he is the son of God.

[29 : 23] He's powerful. Herod looks powerful. He's great. And yet actually he's gutless, he's weak, he's pitiful.

In our world today there are non-Christians that you admire. You are tempted to admire. They're trendy. They're good looking. They're polished. They're well presented.

They are pleasure seeking and they get their pleasures. They drive good cars. They succeed. They're the people that everyone wants to be like and we are tempted to want to be like them too.

But friends, those people in reality, in the invisible reality, are idol worshippers. They are slaves to worthless idols with ever-diminishing returns.

They are superstitious and easily rattled if you question their idols. They're in pitiful slavery to self-gratification with increasing superstition, increasing gutlessness, just like Herod.

[30 : 25] True glory, friends, is found in courageously and boldly bearing the name of Jesus. That's true glory, just like Jesus, just like John.

Jesus has already told us in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are you when people revile you. Blessed are you. And when they persecute you, blessed are you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, says Jesus.

Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. When you are insulted for being a Christian, it's an opportunity for pride in Christ that you are being counted with Jesus, with John the Baptist, with the persecuted prophets.

It's your God-given blessing to break the tie to the idol of people-pleasing. It's your chance to say, I don't live for what these people think of me. I'm going to throw that idol out and smash it.

And at the same time, it's your chance to build treasure for heaven, to build reward in heaven. When people belittle Christianity, it is your opportunity to stand up for Jesus, to say, yep, I'm a Christian.

[31 : 44] Yep, I do believe Jesus is the only way to God. Yep, I do believe people without him are going to hell. Yep, I do believe sex is between one man and one woman for life. God's standard.

God's design. You say these things, people will get rattled. I do believe it's displeasing to my master to get drunk. I'm not going to cheat. No, I'm a Christian.

I serve Jesus. I do believe that God is a trinity. Now, people mock those things and yet it's our opportunity to show who we worship.

People can hang it on us all day, but we know that we will be vindicated for worshipping the true and living God. So friends, be bold because they did it to John the Baptist.

They did it to Jesus. They will do it to you. There's really no, there's no model in the Bible of kind of the cool Christian who kind of gets on side with people and then laid down the track, explains they're a Christian and they're like, oh right, you're a Christian.

[32 : 44] Oh, you're really cool. You know, there's no model like that. The only model is wherever we go, we say we worship Jesus, people's idols are rattled and that they get angry at us.

But it's only by showing them that we don't worship their idols that they will notice you. It's only when people see that we don't fear what they fear that then they are drawn to Christ.

Not because we are cool but because we're not enslaved the way they are to saving face or to sexual gratification or to self-glory or sexual autonomy or all those idols.

That's the way of Christian witness. So friends, let's not live for envy. Let's not succumb to unbelief. Let's not live for people pleasing or man pleasing or saving face.

Let's live and worship Jesus Christ alone. Shall we do that? Amen? Let's pray. Lord Jesus, there's probably more idols in each of our hearts than we even know.

[33 : 57] And so we pray that your spirit would convict us of what they are and so that we can throw them away. Lord God, you are sovereign.

So this week, give each person in this room who claims to follow Jesus an opportunity of confrontation, of a need for a decision to stand for Christ and to not give in to people pleasing or to envy or to unbelief.

Lord God, we believe that you will answer our prayers. We believe that you will take care of us. We believe that you will be glorified through us if we are but faithful to you. Help us not to be so clever that we entertain idols.

Help us to worship your son alone. Amen. Amen.