



## **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

### **Table of Contents**

INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER 1: ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED	3
CHAPTER 2: LOVE IS NOT ALL YOU NEED	5
CHAPTER 3: MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING	7
CHAPTER 4: THE SEDUCTION OF SUCCESS	9
CHAPTER 5: THE POWER AND THE GLORY	11
CHAPTER 6: THE HIDDEN IDOLS IN OUR LIVES	13
CHAPTER 7: THE END OF COUNTERFEIT GODS	15
EPILOGUE: FINDING AND REPLACING YOUR IDOLS	17

# INTRODUCTION

*There are more idols in the world than there are realities. [Friedrich Nietzsche]*

*Alexis de Tocqueville, French aristocrat, diplomat, political scientist, political philosopher and historian, noted in the 1830s about the United States, a “strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants . . . in the midst of abundance.” Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because, de Tocqueville added, “the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart.”*

*De Tocqueville says [the melancholy] comes from taking some “incomplete joy of this world” and building your entire life on it. That is the definition of idolatry.*



Alexis de Tocqueville

## **READ Exodus 20:1-17 (ESV)**

1. What is fundamental to the 10 Commandments?
2. What is “Idolatry?” How would you describe it?
3. How does a marital metaphor help in understanding idolatry?
4. What are some of the idols you see in our culture?
5. Which idols are particularly attractive to you?
6. What are some of the things you fear most?

**FINAL APPLICATION:** How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?

# CHAPTER 1: ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED

*Most people spend their lives trying to make their heart's fondest dreams come true. Isn't that what life is all about, "the pursuit of happiness"? We search endlessly for ways to acquire the things we desire, and we are willing to sacrifice much to achieve them. We never imagine that getting our heart's deepest desires might be the worst thing that can ever happen to us.*

## **READ Romans 1:18-25 (ESV)**

1. What is the fundamental sin Paul writes about in Romans 1?
2. What does God do to those who pursue idols in unrepentance?
3. Why would the greatest punishment imaginable be to allow someone to achieve their fondest dream?
4. What are some of the "lusts of your heart" of which you need to repent?

## **READ Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV)**

5. What was God's demand of Abram? How hard would that be to fulfill?
6. What were God's promises to Abram dependent upon?
7. What stood in the way of this promise's fulfillment and what kind of faith did it take for Abram and Sarai to believe it?

## **READ Genesis 21:1-7 (ESV)**

8. How can you imagine Abraham (now named) and Sarah felt about God's promises at this point?

## **READ Genesis 22:1-14 (ESV)**

9. How does God challenge Abraham's idolatry?
10. Consider the following quote. How does this help you understand God's demands of Abraham?

11. How can you relate the experience of the Egyptians when God judged them in the “Passover?”

12. What was this test ultimately about?

13. How do trials from the Lord help us recognize our idols?

14. What are some ways we can respond well or badly to having our idols stripped from us?

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*

*As many have learned and later taught, you don't realize Jesus is all you need until  
Jesus is all you have.*

*[page 19]*

# CHAPTER 2: LOVE IS NOT ALL YOU NEED

## The Search for Love

*An idolatrous attachment can lead you to break any promise, rationalize any indiscretion, or betray any other allegiance, in order to hold on to it. [page 24]*

*...We know a good thing has become a counterfeit god when its demands on you exceed proper boundaries. Making an idol out of work may mean that you work until you ruin your health, or you break the laws in order to get ahead. Making an idol out of love may mean allowing the lover to exploit and abuse you, or it may cause terrible blindness to the pathologies in the relationship. [pages 23-24]*

1. What are your thoughts on this quote from Keller?

### READ Genesis 25:19-23 (ESV)

2. What was prophesied to Rebekah regarding her children?

### READ Genesis 27:1-13 (ESV)

3. How did Isaac defy the Lord?
4. What took precedence over God's desires for Isaac?

### READ Genesis 29:16-28

5. What does this look like and how does it compare to ancient scholarship that suggests "people didn't generally marry for love, they married for status?" [p. 27]
6. How is sex and romantic relationships idolatrous? Consider this quote:  
*"We maintain the fantasy that if we find our one true soul mate, everything wrong with us will be healed. But when our expectations and hopes reach that magnitude, as Becker says, 'the love object is God.' No lover, no human being, is qualified for that role. No one can live up to that. The inevitable result is bitter disillusionment." [p. 29].*
7. What does Genesis 1-2 tell us about relationships?

### READ Genesis 29:21 - 30:9

8. Describe the sad circumstances of Leah.

9. Describe the sad circumstances of Jacob.

10. What was her response to the gifts of children?

11. Consider the following quote. Describe your own experience with these kinds of disappointments in life.

*C. S. Lewis in Mere Christianity: Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us. (p. 38)*

12. Consider the following quote. Do you agree? Explain.

*When you finally realize this, there are four things you can do.*

- *You can blame the things that are disappointing you and try to move on to better ones. That's the way of continued idolatry and spiritual addiction.*
- *The second thing you can do is blame yourself and beat yourself and say, "I have somehow been a failure. I see everybody else is happy. I don't know why I am not happy. There is something wrong with me." That's the way of self-loathing and shame.*
- *Third, you can blame the world. You can say, "Curses on the entire opposite sex," in which case you make yourself hard, cynical, and empty.*
- *Lastly, you can, as C. S. Lewis says at the end of his great chapter on hope, reorient the entire focus of your life toward God.*

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*

## CHAPTER 3: MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING

*What once was done “for the love of God” is now done for the love of money, i.e., for the love of that which at present affords us the highest feeling of power and a good conscience. (p. 51).*

*What induces one man to use false weights, another to set his house on fire after having insured it for more than its value, while 3/4 of our upper classes indulge in legalized fraud... what gives rise to all this ? It is not real want — for their existence is by no means precarious...but they are urged on day and night by a terrible impatience at seeing their wealth pile up so slowly, and by an equally terrible longing and love for these heaps of gold. (p. 50)*

*Jesus warns people far more often about greed than about sex, yet almost no one thinks they are guilty of it. (p. 52)*

1. What are your thoughts on these quotes?

### **READ Luke 19:1-10 (ESV)**

2. How would you describe Zacchaeus:
3. Why would Zacchaeus take this job?
4. Who invited whom and why is this significant?
5. What was significant about Zacchaeus' promise to give away 50%?
6. How does Zacchaeus go beyond simple giving?

### **READ Luke 12:13-23 (ESV)**

7. What is Jesus' basis for rejecting covetousness?
8. What does it mean to have one's life “consist in the abundance of” possessions?
9. For what reason does Jesus criticize the landowner in His parable?

10. What does it mean to be “rich toward God?”

11. Keller, pointing to chapters 11 and 12 of Luke, suggests that “For Jesus, greed is not only love of money, but excessive anxiety about it.” What do you think?

12. How is greed different than adultery?

### **Grace and Deep Idols**

*Some people are strongly motivated by a desire for influence and power, while others are more excited by approval and appreciation. Some want emotional and physical comfort more than anything else, while still others want security, the control of their environment. People with the deep idol of power do not mind being unpopular in order to gain influence. People who are most motivated by approval are the opposite—they will gladly lose power and control as long as everyone thinks well of them. Each deep idol—power, approval, comfort, or control—generates a different set of fears and a different set of hopes. (pp. 64-65).*

13. What are your deep idols?

14. How do they find expression in surface idols in your life?

### **READ 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (ESV)**

15. In encouraging the Corinthians to give financially, what are Paul’s concerns?

16. How is Jesus an example to us of giving?

17. How was Carnegie an example to us positively and negatively? See his story on page 69.

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*



## CHAPTER 4: THE SEDUCTION OF SUCCESS

*Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will. [Madonna]*

1. Read the following quotes and comment on them.

*"Achievement is the alcohol of our time," says Mary Bell, a counselor who works with high-level executives. She goes on: "These days, the best people don't abuse alcohol. They abuse their lives... You're successful, so good things happen. You complete a project, and you feel dynamite. That feeling doesn't last forever, and you slide back to normal. [pp. 73-74]*

*If your success is more than just success to you—if it is the measure of your value and worth—then accomplishment in one limited area of life will make you believe you have expertise in all areas. [p. 76]*

*...they choose professions not in answer to the question "What job helps people to flourish?" but "What job will help me to flourish?" As a result, there is a high degree of frustration expressed over unfulfilling work. [p. 79]*

### READ 2 Kings 5:1-7 (ESV)

2. Describe Naaman:
3. Naaman might be described as an "insider" except for what?
4. What does Keller suggest was the reason Naaman went to the king of Israel rather than directly to the prophet Elisha?

### READ 2 Kings 5:8-13 (ESV)

5. What did Naaman expect of Elisha?
6. How does the simplicity of Elisha's direction conflict with Naaman's worldview?
7. In what ways does your own "doing" conflict with God's grace?

8. Describe the slave girl:
9. Why are her actions unusual?
10. Read the following quote. How have you sought money, power, and fame to make yourself happy?

*Of all the subjects we obsess about...success is the one we lie about the most—that success and its cousin money will make us secure, that success and its cousin power will make us important, that success and its cousin fame will make us happy. [Helen Rubin in the magazine Fast Company] (p. 92).*

**READ 2 Kings 5:14-16 (ESV)**

11. How does Elisha's response to Naaman's offer of a gift aid in the lesson that Naaman is learning about the Gospel?
12. How does the lesson of Naaman help you understand and apply the Gospel in your life?

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*

## CHAPTER 5: THE POWER AND THE GLORY

*The Nazis claimed to promote deep love of country and people. But somehow as they pursued this thing, “love of country,” their patriotism became demonic and destructive. (p. 97).*

1. Consider the quote above and below and describe ways you have seen patriotism or political goals turn into what can be described as idols.

*When love of one’s people becomes an absolute, it turns into racism. When love of equality turns into a supreme thing, it can result in hatred and violence toward anyone who has led a privileged life. It is the settled tendency of human societies to turn good political causes into counterfeit gods. (p. 98).*

2. Read the following quote and discuss its value in challenging how we engage society around us.

*The great danger is to single out some aspect or phenomenon of God’s good creation and identify it, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain in the drama of human life... This “something” has been variously identified as...the body and its passions (Plato and much of Greek philosophy), culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), institutional authority, especially in the state and the family (much of depth psychology), technology and management techniques (Heidegger and Ellul). . . . The Bible is unique in its uncompromising rejection of all attempts to...identify part of creation as either the villain or the savior. (Al Wolters - pp. 100-101)*

### READ Daniel 2:1-6 (ESV)

3. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed about a towering figure who had feet of clay. As Keller points out, it is possible he saw himself as the towering figure that came crashing down as he woke up in a sweat. Why would he be so troubled being one of the most powerful men on earth?
4. Keller says, “Power, then, is often born of fear and in turn gives birth to more fear.” [p. 109] How do you see this in Nebuchadnezzar’s life and your own?
5. How can our own powerlessness in this life be a source of fear?

### READ Daniel 2:31-35 (ESV)

6. Keller points out that the statue “represented the kingdoms of the earth. It appeared as a giant idol, and represented the idolization of human power and achievement.” What is significant about a “stone” smashing the idol?

7. To what kind of attitude did the dream call Nebuchadnezzar?

**READ Daniel 2:46-47 (ESV)**

8. How did Nebuchadnezzar respond?

9. How does “moralistic, therapeutic deism” fail to describe the reality of life for the Christian?

**READ 1 Corinthians 4:1-7 (ESV)**

10. How does this passage challenge the Nebuchadnezzars of the world?

11. What are the points Paul makes about self-righteousness and judgmentalism?

**READ Daniel 4:20-27 (ESV)**

12. In Daniel 3, what is the disconnect between Nebuchadnezzar’s profession of 2:47 and how he is acting in chapter 3?

13. Keller points out that the first dream was largely “academic,” speaking of the character of God and human power. What is this one about?

**READ Daniel 4:29-33 (ESV)**

14. How do you see this in literal terms in the life of Nebuchadnezzar?

15. Describe individuals who became powerful and became “predators” as Keller says.

**READ Daniel 4:34-35 (ESV)**

16. How does it end for Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4?

17. How does his profession counteract pride and power?

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*

## CHAPTER 6: THE HIDDEN IDOLS IN OUR LIVES

*At the heart of every culture is its main “Hope,” what it tells its members that life is all about.*

**READ** the following and **DISCUSS**:

*“Delbanco traces three phases of American civilization by looking at the fundamental hope of each era, which he names in sequence “God, Nation, and Self.” In the first area “hope was chiefly expressed through a Christian story that gave meaning to suffering and pleasure alike and promised deliverance from death.” In the second phase, “the Enlightenment removed a personal God...and substituted...the idea of a deified nation.” This second phase, which Delbanco says only began to pass away during the 1960s transferred older ideas of sacredness to America itself, so that it came to see itself as the “Redeemer nation” whose system of government and way of life was the hope for the whole world. Today the need for transcendence and meaning has detached itself from anything more important than the individual self and its freedom to be what it chooses.*

Keller lists possible “idols in our religion” on page 131.

1. How can we turn a doctrinal position into an idol? What does that look like?
2. How can a spiritual gift or ministry become an idol? What does that look like?
3. How can “moral living” become an idol? What does this look like?
4. What does it look like when we put our “nation in place of God?”

**READ Jonah 1:1-3 (ESV)**

5. Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh?
6. What was his response and why?

**READ Jonah 1:17 - 2:10 (ESV)**

7. How do verses 3 and 4 describe in a metaphorical way what self-righteousness does to our relationship with the Lord?
8. How does knowing the “Gospel” help us forsake idols that encourage us to turn away from non-believers?
9. How does Paul critique Peter in Galatians 2 when Peter turned away from the Gentiles to eat with the Jews and why?

**READ Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:3 (ESV)**

10. How would you expect chapter 3 to end?
11. What were the motives Jonah had in preaching to the Ninevites? How is his heart revealed?
12. Are there idols that you have that have distorted your thinking in such a way that the goodness of God is unwelcome to you?
13. How does the story on page 147-148 about the violinist help you see how, when your own idols are challenged, it can lead to “paralyzing fear and anxiety?”
14. How is Jesus the “ultimate Jonah?”

**READ Jonah 4:10-11 (ESV)**

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*

# CHAPTER 7: THE END OF COUNTERFEIT GODS

*The human heart is indeed a factory that mass-produces idols.*

**DISCUSS** what the 17th Century minister, David Clarkson, said of idolatry,

*“Though few will own it, nothing is more common.”*

**READ Genesis 31:1-5, 17-21 (ESV)**

1. Why do you think Keller says, “...idols cannot simply be remove. They must be replaced.”
2. In considering the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, how did Jacob’s “idolatry” of Rachel poison their family?
3. Why do you think Rachel stole her father’s idols as they left?

**READ Genesis 32:3-8 (ESV)**

4. Why did Jacob send messengers to Esau?
5. Why was Jacob afraid? What steps did he take for safety?

**READ Genesis 32:22-32 (ESV)**

6. When the man wrestled with Jacob, he “touched” Jacob’s hip and it was put out of joint. The Hebrew word used means “lightest contact or tap.” What kind of clue is this for who this man was?
7. Exodus 33 says a man cannot see the face of God and live. Why do you think the wrestler wanted to leave before sun came up?
8. Why did Jacob hang on when seemingly knowing he was wrestling with God?

**READ Genesis 35:1-4 (ESV)**

9. Jacob continues to have a checkered life as he follows the Lord. How do you interpret his relationship with the Lord?

10. Having read these parts of Jacob's story, how do you see his idolatry at work and his attempts to replace them?

11. How do weaknesses help us to move away from idolatry to faith in Christ?

**READ Galatians 4:4-7 (ESV)**

12. How does knowing this help us replace our idolatries with faith in Christ?

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed today impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*



# EPILOGUE: FINDING AND REPLACING YOUR IDOLS

*It is impossible to understand your heart or your culture if you do not discern the counterfeit gods that influence them.*

## **READ Romans 1:21-23 (ESV)**

1. In this passage what replaces what?
2. Discuss Martin Luther's view that the "fundamental motivation behind lawbreaking is idolatry."

## **READ Acts 17:16-19, 19:23-27 (ESV)**

3. What affect was Paul's preaching having?
4. What impact do your idols have on your life? What makes them hard to give up?
5. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also." This speaks of money directly, but how does it challenge other idolatries?
6. Keller says, "A good way to discern [our idolatry] is how you respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes." Consider how you respond to these and how you may have need to struggle against an idol.
7. Keller says another test of our idols is considering our "most uncontrollable emotions." What are yours?

## **READ Colossians 3:1-5 (ESV)**

8. Keller says, "Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol." [p. 171] How does Paul's writing to the Colossians help us with that?

## **DISCUSS** the comment:

*"Rejoicing and repentance must go together. Repentance without rejoicing will lead to despair. Rejoicing without repentance is shallow and will only provide passing is-irritation instead of deep change." [p. 172]*

**DISCUSS**

*Keller tells the story of two men who unfairly lost their jobs [starting on page 173]. One continued to be cynical and one forgave his boss. Some showed the cynical one sympathy and some told him to willfully get beyond it. Neither worked. Keller says, "The gospel works in a different way. It does not work directly on the emotions or the will. The gospel asks, 'What is operating in the place of Jesus Christ as your real, functional salvation and Savior? What are you looking to in order to justify yourself.'"*

**DISCUSS** John Newton's quote on page 176:

*"If I may speak my own experience, I find that to keep my eye simply on Christ, as my peace and my life, is by far the hardest part of my calling...it seems easier to deny self in a thousand instances of outward conduct, than in its ceaseless endeavors to act as a principle of righteousness and power."*

**FINAL APPLICATION:** *How does what we discussed in this study impact your engagement with your neighbor, job, recreation, family, and environment?*