

PART 5 – DON'T WASTE YOUR ISOLATION

As most of you remember, a few years ago I spent 10 days in the hospital with several weeks of at-home recovery. The most beneficial and spiritually wise thing anyone said to me during that time was, "Make sure there is no ongoing, unrepentant sin in your life over which God is slowing you down to get your attention." This man, a member of our body, was not suggesting that my sickness was necessarily caused by my sin, but that since God is sovereign over everything He could at any time bring something like this on to slow me down, get my attention, and discipline me into repentance over some hidden (or blatant) sin that I was ignoring (or cherishing without repentance). This challenge was good, loving, and wise. My soul benefitted and my faith was strengthened.

It is with that same good, loving, and wise desire I write to you today. May your soul benefit and your faith be strengthened.

I mentioned in Saturday's episode of "Don't Waste Your Isolation" that God has used this pandemic to, among other things, shut down major areas of idolatry in our world. All sporting events have been canceled, from major professional sports leagues down to the most local tee-ball leagues. The entertainment industry has stopped: no concerts are happening, no movies being filmed, no movie theaters, live theaters, bars, clubs, shopping malls, or tourist attractions are open for business, and no international flights or cruises are available. The stock market has plummeted and is volatile from day to day. The list could go on, but this is enough to illustrate that all or any of these are worshipped by people, including Christians.

"Wait!" you might object. "Just because I enjoy sports/movies/travel/shopping/saving/investing, etc. doesn't mean I'm an idolater." Just so. But are you sure? Have you taken inventory? Have you examined your heart with the truth of the word and the piercing clarity of the Holy Spirit? Have you been cherishing some hidden, or blatant, sin in any of these areas that is being revealed for your benefit? Are you using the extra time and energy you have been given during this social separation to humbly ask the Lord to show you your heart in these and other areas of temptation? There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1), and where sin abounds grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20), but these truths must not allow us to sin more so grace abounds more (Romans 6:1-2). The beauty of being a believer is that when we sin we have repentance and grace available to us because God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Consider:

Sports: How much time do you now have free because March Madness, international soccer, Major League Baseball, Razorback sports (insert your favorite team(s) or sports(s) here) have all been canceled? Do you see the blessing of being shown, by their absence, how much time you wasted on watching or participating in sports? Are you neglecting to use this time wisely, by contemplating plans to curb your excesses once things return to normal? If so, sports might be your idol.

Entertainment in general: Are you frustrated that you can't go do _____ which you are in habit of doing regularly? Do you now have so much time on your hands because you used to spend most of your time and energy pursuing your own hobbies, whims, habits, and desires? Are *you* the center of your universe to such an extent that your priorities are driven by the hobbies and habits that make you happy? Are you only truly happy when you are being entertained? If so, entertainment and personal fulfillment might be your idol.

Family: How much time do you now have free because you don't have dozens of rehearsals, practices, lessons, classes, events, fundraisers, meets, and concerts to shuttle kids to each week? How much do you allow your children's desires to control your family rhythms instead of redirecting them to serve others and live more reflective lives? Have you been teaching your children, by the rhythm of your family's life, that pursuing their own happiness is the ultimate meaning of their lives? If so, your family might be your idol.

Travel: Do you travel so often, whether to see grandkids, travel nationally or internationally, camp, hike, stay in nice hotels and eat in nice restaurants, see every site and landmark, or just escape your life, that now without that travel you feel lost? Disconnected? Out of sorts? Does the frequency of your travel cause you to forsake the relationships on which you now must depend but don't have? Are you only truly happy when you are living in someone else's land and life? If so, travel might be your idol.

Finances: Has your world fallen apart because your retirement has been wrecked? Have you put so much stock in your stocks that their devaluation devalues your attitude and spiritual state? Have you placed your faith in finances instead of the one true God? Have all the cancellations caused you anger and stress because your quests for personal happiness (see all of the above) have been canceled after they were already paid for? Are you fearful of the future because of the failure of your finances? Is loss of job or income your greatest fear? Do you hoard your wealth rather than meet real needs of real people? Does your wealth cause you to be greedy rather than generous? If so, money/finances might be your idol.

Now please hear me: none of these things are bad in and of themselves. Every good gift comes down from the Father of lights, and God blesses the obedience of his children. The gifts of financial security and multiple opportunities to allow our children to find out what they enjoy doing are true blessings from God. The ability to travel around the world and not let miles separate grandparents from their grandchildren is truly a blessing our ancestors did not have.

But pursuing any or all of these things with a passion consistently greater than you pursue your Savior and obedience to His word is idolatry. Devoting time to any or all of these things (and teaching your children to do the same by your actions) that causes you

to *regularly* forsake your family, *regularly* forsake gathering together for worship (not just when it is convenient around your personal pursuit of happiness), *regularly* neglect to serve others with your time and wealth, use your spiritual gifts to edify the body of Christ, and participate in many other spiritual blessings we have been given by being a part of the family of God, is idolatry. Finding ultimate sustenance, happiness, and satisfaction in any of these things rather than your union with Christ is idolatry.

Has the Lord provided this pandemic as loving discipline for you to consider hidden or blatant sin in any of these areas? Have your passion, productivity, and priorities been driven with you and your happiness at the center or Christ and His glory at the center.

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:6b-10).

Don't waste your isolation. It might be intended to lead you to repentance and draw you near to God. What a blessing.

Because of Christ,
Pastor Rob