

2

CHAPTER

WHOSE IDOLS ARE IN THE WAY?

IF we are ever to be effective for Christ in the lives of our teenagers, it is important to be honest about our own idols—the places where *we* have tended to exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of created things. Too often when we seek to understand the struggles of adolescence, we only look at teenagers and their problems. In reality, it is time for us to take a look inside and ask, “What really rules *our* hearts?” Now, surely, every Christian parent would spontaneously give the correct theological answer. We are God’s children. He rules our hearts. Or does he? This is not about a theological affirmation, but about our day-to-day worship. At the level where the rubber meets the road—in the bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, and hallways of life—what really controls our hearts?

Start with Your Heart

It is a waste of time for us as parents to think about strategies for parenting our teens without first examining ourselves. If our hearts are controlled by something other than God, we will not view the

Chapter Two

golden parenting opportunities of the teen years as opportunities at all. Instead they will be a constant stream of irritating hassles brought on by an incredibly self-centered person who is neither adult nor child, but who has the uncanny ability to make even the most unimportant moments of our lives chaotic. The cynicism of our culture toward teenagers not only reveals something about who teenagers are, but it also reveals what we as parents are serving. Our hearts blind us to the opportunities all around us during the teen years.

There is an important principle here that is taught all through Scripture, but enunciated most clearly in Ezekiel 14:4: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him in keeping with his great idolatry.”

Let me put this passage in my own words. The leaders of Israel have come to God to hear his words to them, but as they come, God recognizes that their hearts have been captured by idols. So, God says, “Because there are idols in your hearts, the only thing that I am interested in talking about is your idolatry.” Why? There is a little phrase here that clues us in. God says that when a person sets up an idol in his heart, he also puts “a wicked stumbling block before his face.” The principle revealed here is the principle of inescapable influence. What controls my heart will control my life. An idol of the heart will always put a wicked stumbling block before my face.

Imagine that you have placed your hand, with fingers narrowly separated, in front of your face. When you attempt to look through your fingers, your vision is obstructed. As long as your hand is in front of your face, no matter where you turn to look, your vision will be altered by your fingers. So it is with an idol in my heart. It will exercise inescapable influence over my life. Wherever I go, whatever I am doing, the idol will influence what I do and how I do it. This is the reason God

WHOSE IDOLS ARE IN THE WAY?

says, “It makes no sense for me to talk about anything else, because whatever I say somehow, some way, will be used to serve the idol that rules your heart. Therefore, I want to deal with your idolatry. That is my priority.”

We cannot ignore this central issue. I am deeply persuaded that our idols have caused us to see opportunity as trial and caused us to strike back at our teenagers with bitter words of judgment, accusation, and condemnation, behaving toward them with intolerance and anger. While God is calling us to love, accept, forgive, and serve, we are often barely able to be nice.

Let’s consider some typical parental idols and the way they shape our responses to our teens.

The Idol of Comfort

Secretly in our hearts, many of us want life to be a resort. A resort is a place where you are the one who is served. Your needs come first, and you only do what you want to do when you want to do it. The only demands you deal with in a resort are the demands you put on yourself. At a resort, you live with a sense of entitlement. You’ve paid your money, and you have the right to expect certain things. I am afraid that many of us live for comfort and bring this entitlement mentality to our parenting. We reason that we have the right to quiet, harmony, peace, and respect, and we respond in anger when we do not get it.

Scripture warns us that life is far from being a resort. Life is war. This is clearly demonstrated in the teen years. I have said to my teenagers many times as they are leaving home, “There is a war out there; it is being fought on the turf of your heart. It is being fought for the control of your soul.” The tumult, chaos, and unrest of the teen years are not only the result of significant biological changes taking place, but because of a dramatic spiritual war going on as well.

Parents who demand comfort, ease, regularity, peace, space, quiet,

Chapter Two

and harmony will be ill-equipped for this war. They will begin to see their teenager as the enemy. They will begin to fight *with* him rather than for him, and even worse, they will tend to forget the true nature of the battle and the identity of the real enemy. They will act out of frustrated desire, doing and saying regrettable things, and they will fail to be effective and productive in those strategic moments of ministry in which God has placed them.

The Idol of Respect

The father had stomped on every one of his daughter's CDs. He had locked her in her room every night, and had publicly shared her sins with the whole church at a prayer meeting. He had slapped her in the face in front of her friends, and tried to goad and belittle her into submission. He never failed to remind her that he had been a model teen. In my office, he told me with great energy and resolve, "I will get her to respect me if it is the last thing I ever do!"

Respect is what ruled his heart. He was convinced that he was entitled to it. Thus, every issue became an issue of respect. He saw disrespect where there was none. Life became a series of final exams in which he never gave his daughter better than an "F." He viewed all of the development, insecurity, and awkwardness of his daughter as a personal affront. There was no vertical, spiritual dimension to his thinking. He saw his daughter not in terms of her relationship to God, but only in relation to himself. He did not see himself as an agent to lead her to a life-saving fear of God. His heart was driven by the goal that she would fear *him* and give him the respect he thought he deserved.

Is respect a good thing? Of course! Is it something that parents should seek to instill in their children? Yes! But it must not be the thing that controls my heart or I will personalize what is not personal, I will

WHOSE IDOLS ARE IN THE WAY?

lose sight of my role as God's representative, and I will fight for and demand what only God can produce.

Sadly, the father's eyes were blind to the god that ruled him and to the fact that in his quest to get respect, he encouraged the exact opposite response.

The Idol of Appreciation

We've been there when the calls have come from school. We've been there in the wee hours of the morning when the nightmares have hit. We've changed the bed that had been wet once again. We've gone out in pajamas and slippers to the all-night drugstore for medicine. We've made the special skateboard-shaped birthday cakes. We've cleaned up vomit from the bedroom carpet. We've sat in on meetings with the principal. We've spent hours making the papier-mâché volcano. We've provided transportation to thousands of events. We've sat through scores of painful recitals, spent thousands on memorable vacations. We've walked miles and miles in the aisles of the supermarket so mouths would be fed and stomachs filled. We've trudged hours through malls looking for "cool" clothes. We've washed enough clothes to fill the Grand Canyon! We've given up our dreams to pay for musical instruments and braces. Isn't it about time that we get some credit?

I cannot tell you how many times I've heard parts of this list recited to me by parents, always with that same, final punch line. It seems so logical, so harmless, so right. Children *should* appreciate their parents. Yet being appreciated cannot be our goal. When it becomes the thing we live for, we will unwittingly look with hyper-vigilant eyes for appreciation in every situation.

Teenagers don't often burst in the door at the end of the day and say, "Do you know what I was thinking about on the bus ride home today, Mom? I was thinking about how much you and Dad have done for me over the years. You have been with me and for me from the very first

Chapter Two

moment of my life until now. On the bus I was flooded with gratitude and I just couldn't wait to get home and say thank you!" If this happens to you, erect stones as a lasting memorial, or light an eternal flame!

Very few parents have headed to bed only to hear sobbing coming from their teenage daughter's bedroom and had this conversation. "What's wrong, Dear?" "Oh, I was just thinking about you and Mom and how unthankful I've been. I feel so guilty that I haven't appreciated you more, and I've committed myself to demonstrating that I appreciate you every day!" On the contrary, the trend for teenagers is to be much more filled with self-orientation and self-interest than to be filled with an awareness and appreciation of others.

If parents have forgotten their own vertical relationship with God as they've ministered to their teens, if they think of it all as an "I serve, you appreciate" contract between parent and child, they will struggle with lots of discouragement and anger during the teen years. Just when parents expect their almost-grown child to give a little something back, they seem to be more selfish and lacking in gratitude than ever before. Again, every parent needs to ask, "Why am I doing what I am doing? Who am I serving? What are the things that I have come to expect and demand? Whose desires rule the moments of opportunity with my teenager—God's or mine?"

The Idol of Success

I listened as the father said to me in the presence of his teenage son, "Do you know what it's like to go to church and know that everyone there has been talking about and praying for your rebellious son? Do you know what it's like to enter a service with all eyes on you, knowing that people are wondering how it is going and how you and your wife are coping? This is not the way it is supposed to be. We tried to faithfully do everything God called us to do as parents, and look what we ended up with! I ask myself, if I knew that this was the way it would

WHOSE IDOLS ARE IN THE WAY?

all turn out, would we have ever chosen to have children? I cannot describe how disappointed and embarrassed I am.”

That afternoon, with his son listening, that father spoke what many parents have felt but never verbalized. We tend to approach parenting with expectations as if we had hard-and-fast guarantees. We think that if we do our part, our children will be model citizens. Yet in a fallen world, this is not the way it works. We tend to approach parenting with a sense of ownership, that these are our children and their obedience is our right.

These assumptions pave the way for our identity to get wrapped up in our children. We begin to need them to be what they should be so that we can feel a sense of achievement and success. We begin to look at our children as our trophies rather than God’s creatures. We secretly want to display them on the mantels of our lives as visible testimonies to a job well done. When they fail to live up to our expectations, we find ourselves not grieving for them and fighting for them, but angry at them, fighting against them, and, in fact, grieving for ourselves and our loss. We are angry because they have taken something valuable away from us, something we have come to treasure, something that has come to rule our hearts: a reputation for success.

It is so easy to lose sight of the fact that these are God’s children. They do not belong to us. They are given not to bring *us* glory, but *him*. Our teenagers are from him, they exist through him, and the glory of their lives points to him. We are but agents to accomplish his plan. We are but instruments in his hands. Our identity is rooted in him and his call to us, not in our children and their performance. The ultimate rejection that should make us weep is not that they have rejected us, but him.

As parents, we are in trouble whenever we lose sight of these “vertical realities,” when we lose sight of God, his ownership of our children, and his call to us to be faithful parents no matter what the out-

Chapter Two

come. Whenever parenting is reduced to our hard work, the teen's performance, and the reputation of the family, it will be very hard for us to respond with selfless faithfulness in the face of our child's failure. God-ordained moments of ministry will become moments of angry confrontation filled with words of judgment. Instead of leading the needy teen once again to Christ, we will beat him with words. Instead of loving, we will reject. Instead of speaking words of hope, we will condemn. Our feelings will be flooded much more with our own embarrassment, anger, and hurt than with grief over our wayward child's standing before God.

We need to start with an examination of our own hearts. Do we have an attitude of ownership and entitlement? Have we subtly become ruled by reputation? Is there within us a struggle to love our teenager? Is there distance between us that is the result of that struggle? Are we oppressed by thoughts of what others think? Have we even doubted the principles of the Word and why they haven't "worked" for us? These questions need to be faced if we are ever to be what God has commanded us to be in the lives of our teenagers, who are sinners living in a fallen world.

The Idol of Control

I am increasingly persuaded that there are only two ways of living: (1) trusting God and living in submission to his will and his rule, or (2) trying to be God. There is little in between. As sinners we seem to be better at the latter than we are at the former!

This spiritual dynamic hits right at the heart of parenting. Successful parenting is the rightful, God-ordained loss of control. The goal of parenting is to work ourselves out of a job. The goal of parenting is to raise children who were once totally dependent on us to be independent, mature people who, with reliance on God and proper con-

WHOSE IDOLS ARE IN THE WAY?

nectedness to the Christian community, are able to stand on their own two feet.

In the early years of parenting, we were in control of everything, and although we complained about the stress of it all, we liked having the power! There is little that an infant chooses to do, other than spontaneous bodily functions. We chose their food, times of rest, manner of physical exercise, what they saw and heard, where they went, who their friends were, and the list could go on and on. However, the truth is that from day one our children are growing independent. The baby who once was unable to roll over without assistance now can crawl into the bathroom without our permission and unravel the entire roll of toilet paper! This same child will soon be driving away from the house to places well out of our parental reach.

It creeps up on us. We expect our kids to turn out just like us. I love sports, played sports in school, and like to watch them. I remember the first time my oldest son Justin said that he did not want to watch a football game with me. What? No love for football? I wanted to say, "It's not right! I raised you to be a fan of organized sports! Don't you want to be like me?"

Or I remember when my daughter Nicole first announced that she did not like peanut butter. It was almost like saying that she didn't like Christmas or summer vacation. There almost seemed to be something theologically wrong with it! I determined that I would convince her that peanut butter was great. Before she left this home she would have a deep and abiding commitment to spreadable crushed peanuts!

How many parents have struggled with the friends that their children have chosen? Yes, the choice of companions is a very serious matter, but it is also a place where we surrender control to a maturing child. The goal of parenting is not to retain tight-fisted control over our children in an attempt to guarantee their safety and our sanity. Only God is able to exercise that kind of control. The goal is to be used of

Chapter Two

him to instill in our children an ever-maturing self-control through the principles of the Word and to allow them to exercise ever-widening circles of choice, control, and independence.

I regularly work with parents who want to turn back the clock. They think that the only hope is to go back to the former days of total control. They try to treat their teenager like a little child. They end up more like jailers than parents, and they forget to minister the Gospel that is the only hope in those crucial moments of struggle.

It is vital that we remember the truths of the Gospel: First, there is no situation that is not “under control,” for Christ “rules over all things for the sake of his body, the church” (Eph. 1:22). Second, not only is the situation under control, but God is at work in it doing the good that he has promised to do (Rom. 8:28). So I do not need to control my teenager’s every desire, thought, and action. In every situation he is under the sovereign control of Christ, who is accomplishing what I cannot. Third, I need to remember that the goal of my parenting is not to conform my children to my image, but to work so that they are conformed to the image of Christ! My goal is not to clone my tastes, my opinions, and my habits in my children. I am not looking for my image in them; I long to see Christ’s.

We cannot consider the teenage years, with their tumult and struggle, without honestly looking at what we, as parents, bring to the struggle. If our hearts are ruled by comfort, respect, appreciation, success, and control, we will unwittingly hunger for our teens to meet our expectations instead of ministering to their spiritual needs. Instead of seeing moments of struggle as God-given doors of opportunity, we will view them as frustrating, disappointing irritants, and we will experience growing anger against the very children to whom we have been called to minister.