

Seduced by the Idol of Approval

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Mark D. Vroegop

Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, Whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, And shall not see when good comes, But shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, In a salt land which is not inhabited. "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit. "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings (Jer 17:5-10).

Jeremiah was man and a prophet who understood and battled the fear of man. God had called him out of the womb (Jer. 1:5) and gave him this instruction: *"Whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, For I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord" (1:7b-8).* Why would God say that?

Jeremiah had a hard ministry that involved saying hard things. He served during a tense time and uncertain time in Israel's history. Politically the world was changing. Assyria had already taken the Northern Kingdom into captivity, but it was losing its hold on power around the world. Babylon was a rising threat to Assyria, and eventually in 612 B.C. the Babylonian army took control of the capital city of Nineveh. Babylon ruled the Middle East.

Not long after the Babylonians conquered Assyria, they began taking exiles from Judah as a means of conforming the world to their Babylonian culture. Daniel and his three friends were part of that first exile group, and the prophet Ezekiel would follow in years to come.

Jeremiah's ministry overlapped these years, serving during the reigns of five kings, and Josiah (the first) was the only good one. And the nagging question was what was going to happen to God's people with this looming threat of Babylon. Jeremiah was God's spokesman to call the people to repentance (over 100 times). He was known as the "weeping prophet" because he was consumed with grief over the waywardness of the people.

His message was not popular. In one instant he was told to go to the temple, in the court of the Lord's house (Jer. 26) and tell the people, "If you do not listen to me and walk in the Law of God, God will destroy this city and this temple. He will make it a curse to every nation on the earth" (Jer. 26:6). His words enraged the people, and he was arrested.

God then tells him to put on a yoke of oxen (Jer. 27) and he was to tell King Jehoiakim that God had given the land of Israel and the surrounding lands to King Nebuchadnezzar. He was told to go to the King and tell him that if he resisted, God would punish him. And if that wasn't enough, he made six other yokes and sent them the neighboring kings telling them the same thing.

Jeremiah, a man who knew the fear of man

So when we hear the words of God in Jeremiah 17 to this prophet, these are not just pithy statements. This is part and parcel to Jeremiah's life, and it was not an easy calling. We get a brief glimpse of this in Jeremiah 20:8-11:

I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, "Violence and plunder!" Because the word of the LORD was made to me A reproach and a derision daily. Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not. For I heard many mocking: "Fear on every side!" "Report," they say, "and we will report it!" All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, "Perhaps he can be induced; Then we will prevail against him, And we will take our revenge on him." But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One.

Jeremiah knew that the fear of man is conquered by a more powerful force. He found that the desire to be quiet was blown away by the burning power of God's words in his heart. He knew that all the threats had nothing on God's power. He knew how to live on this phrase: "*Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD*" (vs 7)."

If, at the end of this series, all that I have helped you do is fear people less, I will not have accomplished my goal for this series. I do not want you to live with a new chip on your shoulder that sounds like this: "I don't care what they think!" Because at one level we **do** have to care what people think, and we are told to honor and fear certain people. However, caring what people think and having that control your life are two very different things.

The Approval and Idolatry Connection

Today, we are dealing with the vertical. What does this issue say about my view of God? At the heart of our question today is the issue of idolatry. What does the fear of man say about what I think about God? What is the connection between approval addiction and idolatry?

1. Approval addiction comes from an idol in our heart.

From Jeremiah 17 we see that the man who puts his trust in man and makes flesh his strength is cursed. And it also tell us something about his heart – it is (or has) turned away from God. "*Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, Whose heart departs from the LORD*" (Jer. 17:5). The implications of this verse are so

clear: putting your trust in man means that your heart is in rebellion against God, even if it is just for a few seconds.

Idolatry, for some of you, may seem like a weird word or strange issue to connect to the fear of man. When you think of idols you think of religious figurines with candles around it or placed into a cut-out in a wall. Or you might think of missionary slides that look more like voodoo dolls. Perhaps you can remember reading about Baal and the Ashteroth poles in the Old Testament.

Have you ever thought, "What is the big deal with these idols? Do these people really think that this piece of gold or wood is God? Do they really think that this idol is powerful?" It goes to the question, "What is the lure or the attraction of idols?" My answer is this: the attraction to the idol is the belief that the idol represents something that can give me what I want. Essentially, the problem with the fear of man is what it eclipses. The fear of man eclipses God. The thoughts of others become more important than what God is thinking about us.

You might say that you do not have any idols. True, you may not have any figurines in your home, a shrine in your wall, a picture of Jesus, or an image of Mary on a tortilla. But hear the words of Ezekiel:

"Thus says the Lord GOD: "Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols" (Ezekiel 14:4-5).

Idolatry is not just an issue of figurines or wooden idols; figurines, candle-light shrines, and people are conduits for our lustful hearts. We use them and the result is a cursed life. At issue all the time is what we really love. For instance, there were a group of rulers who believed Jesus' teaching, but refused to identify with him or confess him. John 12:42-43 explains why:

"Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."

Their love for the praise of men caused them to be silent about Christ.

"When you think of it, idolatry is the age-old strategy of the human heart. The objects of worship may change over time, but the heart stays the same. What we do is no different from what the Israelites did with the golden calf...They felt very vulnerable and needy. Even though they had witnessed the power of God, they felt afraid. They felt out of control. Their remedy was to choose an idol over the true God."¹

¹ Welch, p. 45.

When it comes to approval, the first thing that I want you to notice here is that the real problem begins in the heart with strong and often good desires. Addiction to approval comes from the inside, from within. It comes from a place inside of us that is only reserved for God.

Therefore, when the fear of man begins to hit us we have to stop and think. We've got to constantly ask ourselves, "What am I thinking?" We've got to ask ourselves very pointedly, "Who is my functional god right now?"

2. We create approval-gods to give us what we want.

If you were to look at idolatry in the Old Testament or in cultures that practice Animism (worship of objects), the power of the idol is in the "want" of the worshipper. We create idols so that we can control them. We create idols in order to give us what we want. "{Idols} are worshipped because we perceive that they have power to give us something. We think they can bless us."²

The power of the idol is in the hope that it will give me what I want and the fact that for a few brief moments my idol makes me feel good. The spiritual and the physical realms are often deeply connected. It goes like this:

- The idolatrous heart longs for something – "I want!"
- It looks for fulfillment and it makes demands upon the body or the emotions – "They or that can meet my needs."
- When fulfilled, the person feels pleasure, happiness, or moments of satisfaction – "This feels good!"

Now what happens when that is over? Does the person say, "I've never felt more alive and loved in my entire life. Now I'm complete. I can move on"? Of course not. The problem with this cycle is that once is never enough. That's the way idols work. The lure of the idol is in what you do not have.

When you want something more than what you have, what is that called? Covetousness. Do you know that Bible links covetousness and idolatry? "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5-6).

The insatiable desire for more and our passion to get it means that we are discontent with what God has given us, and that we want to provide for ourselves. At the heart of this issue is the matter of worship. Therefore, Paul links covetousness to idolatry. Idolatry is your "want" without God. Idols are merely the conduit for our desire.

So what does the idol of approval sound like or look like?

- "You must be the sweetest person I know"

² Edward Welch. When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1997. p. 45.

- "Wow, you must be doing well"
- "You sure look cute in that outfit"
- "That was a great idea"
- "No one listens to me like you do"

The problem with these statements is the fact that nothing is inherently wrong with them and, if we are honest, they feel good. And those things should feel good. But when they land on a vacant heart churning with idols, it is a dangerous situation. I'm sure you've seen it:

- A marriage that is in trouble because of a spouse that is never satisfied
- A single adult who is overly desperate for a relationship
- A couple so infatuated with each other that cut off all other relationships, including close family members
- A person who swore they'd never commit adultery but did because it "met a need" in their heart
- A person addicted to pornography because the image on the screen seems to want him

Oh beware of the idol-factory of "want" in your life! It has destroyed many relationships.

3. We set up idols because we want to be god.

There is a connection between fear, control, and idolatry. But it also has something to do with trust. This is probably one of the most important points in our entire series.

Such was the problem in Israel during Jeremiah's day:

"Do you not fear Me?" says the LORD. 'Will you not tremble at My presence, Who have placed the sand as the bound of the sea, By a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass beyond it? And though its waves toss to and fro, Yet they cannot prevail; Though they roar, yet they cannot pass over it. But this people has a defiant and rebellious heart; They have revolted and departed. They do not say in their heart, "Let us now fear the LORD our God..." (Jer 5:22-24).

"An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" (Jer 5:30-31).

When the thoughts of others control you, or when the fear of them eclipses the fear of God – you are guilty of idolatry. You are giving them power that only belongs to God, and you are doing it in order to get what you want. So the real god of my life is not other people – IT IS ME!

So here is a way to think about the fear of man: **Using people to get what I want.** When I understood this, it set me on a new path. I came to understand that the desire for the approval of others was actually an attempt for me to run my own life. Being an

approval junkie means that I use people for **myself**. Make no mistake about it that is exactly what Baal worship was all about.

“They opposed God by trusting in themselves and their own gods rather than the true God. After all, they couldn’t be absolutely certain that God was going to bless the women with fertility. And what about those other gods that seemed to have power to give abundant crops? Just in case God was not enough, they started to follow other gods. They thought idols would give them what they wanted or felt they needed. They wanted a god they could control.”³

This is where the approval piece begins to become very controlling. The cycle of idolatry grows as the heart not only has a strong desire but is actually enslaved. The person hates how this controls their life but they can’t stop. The result is that more demands are put on relationships and people, and more pressure is brought to bear on people. But the person is becoming more and more miserable because the heart’s appetite is insatiable.

All it takes is one wrong look, a missed conversation, not being invited to a party, a misunderstood text message or a less than friendly greeting and this person is depressed. A friend of mine put it this way: “This guy got in my head. What he thought of me was my last thought of the day and my first thought when I woke up.”

What is going on here? We want to control our own lives. We want to dictate what people think or say about us. We want to be god!

4. Our idolatrous craving for approval ruins our lives.

Control. What I want. What I need. Fear. These are all words that spring from idolatrous hearts. But the tragic result is that the very thing that we thought we were controlling ends up controlling us. That is why I say that we use people to get what we want even though what they think of us controls us.

Living this way destroys everything. Jeremiah 17 records that the Lord describes those who trust in man like this:

“They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, on the salty flats where no one lives” (Jer 17:5-6 – NLT).

Notice how dry, barren, fruitless, hopeless, and lonely this description is. It is a very depressing picture and one this is designed to remind us not to live like this. Trusting in man leads to a life of barrenness.

“...The idol we choose to worship soon owns us... Although insignificant in itself, the idol becomes huge and rules us. It tells us how to think, what to feel, and how to act. It tell us what to wear, it tells us to laugh at the dirty joke, and it tells us to be

³ IBID

frightened to death that we might have to get up in front of a group and say something. The whole strategy backfires. We never expect that using people to meet our desires leaves us enslaved to them.”⁴

The fear of man never turns out like you hope. It seems like a good idea, but in the end the consequences are tragic. The person is often guilty of the following:

- Is defensive, shifts the blame on others and is angry when others oppose him or her
- Is critical, condemning, negative and judgmental, especially of those who are in positions of authority
- Feels constantly defensive and is easily threatened
- Is more prone to command than to obey, to teach than to be taught, to speak rather than listen
- Is impatient or upset when contradicted or challenged in speech, especially when it is in front of others
- Is unwilling to cover issues in love or to forgive people who have sinned against her
- Is often discontent with life, struggles with covetousness at many levels

The approval junkie is miserable because his or her relentless desire for approval destroys relationships. Tragic consequences from what seems like a good idea. Contrast that with what God says about the man who trusts in Him:

“For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit” (Jer 17:8).

To fear something is to ascribe it power. To hope in it is to ascribe it the ability to be powerful in your future. Fear, trust, and hope all go together. What I fear controls me. What controls me is my idol. Whatever is my idol is my god.

To break the cycle of addiction to approval of man we have to ask ourselves:

- “Who is my god right now!”
- Is God really more important to me than anything or anyone else at this moment?
- Can I be satisfied with Him alone?

And can I remind you that God sees your heart? There is no hiding from him. Our passage closes with a warning:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings” (Jer 17:9-10).

May I ask you a few penetrating questions:

⁴ Welch, p. 46.

- So as God sees your heart today what does he see?
- Does He see it full of “want”?
- What are the names of the conduits of your wants and desires?
- Is He speaking to you this very moment about real problem – the idol of your heart?
- Do you know today that the real problem is the fact that you want to the god of your life?
- Do you see where all of this is leading?

Think of what life could be like if you were free from the idol of approval! Think of what it would be like to know Christ and to be satisfied in him so that you could be free.

I read a hymn story this week about George Matheson who wrote the song “O Love that Will Not Let Me Go.”

At age 20 George Matheson (1842-1906) was engaged to be married but began going blind. When he broke the news to his fiancée, she decided she could not go through life with a blind husband. She left him. Before losing his sight he had written two books of theology and some feel that if he had retained his sight he could have been the greatest leader of the church of Scotland in his day.

A special providence was that George’s sister offered to care for him. With her help, George left the world of academia for pastoral ministry and wound up preaching to 1500 each week—blind.

The day came, however, in 1882, when his sister fell in love and prepared for marriage herself. The evening before the wedding, George’s whole family had left to get ready for the next day’s celebration. He was alone and facing the prospect of living the rest of his life without the one person who had come through for him. On top of this, he was doubtless reflecting on his own aborted wedding day twenty years earlier. It is not hard to imagine the fresh waves of grief washing over him that night.

In the darkness of that moment George Matheson wrote this hymn.⁵

O Love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be

Oh to be free like that! To see the seductive power of the idol of approval, and to learn to live on the only love that will never let you go!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

⁵ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/page/2/>