

Simple Sundays

**What is
Idolatry?**



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|---|----|
| Session 1: Watch Patiently | 1 |
| Session 2: The Burning Truth | 4 |
| Session 3: Household Gods | 7 |
| Session 4: Dwindling Business | 10 |

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Main Idea

The Bible gives us examples of idols that appear when people do not have faith and shows us how our faith grows when we hold onto something we cannot see or feel.

You Will Need

11 sheets of paper; bibles; pencils; markers

Faith Statement

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage . . . to unmask idolatries in Church and culture.

—A Brief Statement of Faith

Background

While they might have forgotten their God, the people recalled vividly the Egyptian image of the young bull that represented to them reproductive power and fertility, a welcome combination for their wilderness journey. In an extended, emotion-filled moment, the people God rescued from generations of slavery in Egypt feared they were alone, looked at their redesigned gold contributions, and believed it was the Lord. Through everything, Moses remained steadfast. As their situations changed, the people behaved differently than Moses expected. God told Moses about the people's infidelity, reaffirming that God already knows when we stray to idols, even when we do not realize it.

Aaron exemplifies the latter when he rejects responsibility for the fiasco, blames others, and completely ignores the reality of how it came to be. It is curious that Aaron took on the difficult job of accompanying and speaking for Moses in confronting Pharaoh (Exodus 4:14-16), but slipped from his faith at the first word from the people. Remember that Aaron still became the traditional founder of the priesthood as leader of the Levites.

God's anger is understandable. In addition to worshiping the idol, the people were singing, feasting, and dancing. It had only been weeks since they made their covenant with God (Exodus 24). Moses must have heard the first two commandments when he broke the tablets containing the Law, just as the people had broken their covenant with God.

Jeremiah offers God's solution to broken covenants—the new covenant will be written, not on stone tablets, but on the human heart: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

You and Your Youth

Spiritual disciplines introduce youth to different ways of experiencing God's presence. While just as necessary for adults, it is especially helpful for youth to experience prayer in a way that is comfortable to them. By modeling these various forms of prayer, you are allowing the youth to discover the experience that draws them closest to God.

 **Enter**

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Fright Time

Begin the session in a darkened room by discussing your favorite scary movies. Talk about what made the movies scary. Is it the technique used in shooting the film, the story itself, or the images and music? Was the movie scary because it is so unbelievable or because it could possibly happen?

Turn the conversation to discuss the kinds of things in life that scare the group. Some may relate being fearful to a babysitting experience when they had to calm a frightened child. Discuss the following questions:

- What physical changes do people experience when they are afraid?
- What calms people down?
- Is there a time when fear has made you do something you otherwise would not have done?

Opening Prayer

Awesome God, we want to know who you are. We want to know what you are like. In unmasking the things you are not, let us discover the truth that comes from your Spirit. Amen.

 **Explore****Study the Bible***Bibles*

Introduce the word *covenant*, and invite the youth to offer definitions of the word.

Working together, look up the following Scripture passages to explore the covenant that God established with Moses and the Hebrew people:

- Exodus 19:3–7
- Exodus 20:1–17
- Exodus 31:18

Discuss:

- What has God done for the people of Israel? What does God want from the people?
- What famous set of rules does God give the people to help them keep their covenant with God?

Turn to Exodus 32:1–28. Ask volunteers to take turns reading the long passage.

Discuss:

- What were the people feeling that led to their wrongdoing? (See Exodus 32:1.)
- How does Moses react to the people's worship of the golden calf? (See Exodus 32:25–28.)
- Does Moses' command that the sons of Levi slaughter the people for their sin surprise you? Why or why not?

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 together. Discuss:

- Why does God make these changes to the covenant?
- What does it mean to have something written on your heart?
- How do you know that God belongs to you and you belong to God?

Creating Idols

Paper, pencils

Say that some Christians believe that the basic sin is idolatry, replacing God—the Creator—in our lives, with something in creation. Idols pull people away from God.

Write the following categories on 11 separate sheets of paper: computers, friends, television, radio, parties, dating, books, advertising, Internet, smart phones, and money.

Take a couple of minutes to write under each category situations that could produce idols. Ask the youth to discuss and question each other's answers.

Something to Hold On To

Often in the church we use symbols to remind us of what we believe. Symbols appear through your church building, especially in the sanctuary, and in homes or on cars of Christians. You also may have a cross hanging in your home or a fish sticker on the back of your car. Discuss how you use symbols of your faith. Talk about how the symbols named differ from idols that are also material representations of religion.

Hopefully, your discussion will help you understand that symbols represent an aspect of God that makes people closer to God, while idols become the object of worship and take people away from God.



Express

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not seem to relate to these situations, then change them to make them relevant to your life.

Youth Issue

Suppose you are interested in trying out for your school's basketball team. After several months you have your sights set on impressing the coaching staff. Before trying out for the team, you regularly attended church and participated in youth group outings, sang in the youth choir, and often read from the Bible during worship services. Members of the session thought you would be an outstanding leader of the church, who could serve as an elder or deacon.

Suddenly, you stop attending church and your friends see less and less of you. A few of your friends in the youth group explain that you are desperately trying to make the high school basketball team, leaving little time for anything else in life. Several months pass and the coaches give you the good news: you have made the team. You are ecstatic when you are told. Because several of the games are scheduled to be played on Sunday afternoons, you vow to improve and choose to practice during the church school hour, skipping worship services completely. In addition, you tell friends from the church that you can't serve as an elder or deacon in the church or attend worship services because of your commitment related to basketball.

If you are in this situation, is it fair to say you are taking your commitment to basketball too far? Why or why not? Have you placed more importance on basketball than on God? Is this idolatry?

Action Steps

Paper, pencils

- Make a list of the idols you will be exposed to during the coming week.
- Reflect on how your opinion has changed, if at all, about idols as a result of your discussion in this session.



Exit

Intercessory Imaging Prayer

Intercessory prayer is offering a prayer for another person or community. Accepting our failings and offering grace, Jesus taught us to do that for one another.

Intercessory imaging prayer is a way of praying for others, using mental pictures instead of words. It is helpful when you do not know what to ask for that person.

Find a comfortable position. After taking a few moments to become quiet and centered, close your eyes and visualize the person for whom you are interceding. Picture her or him as concretely as possible, calling to mind a vivid picture. Hold this picture in your mind.

Next visualize the presence of Christ as light—a halo or blanket of light that comes on the person you are imaging, surrounding him or her with the light of Christ. After a few moments of holding that person in prayer, open your eyes.

Closing Prayer

Ever present God, while we watch for your presence in our lives, keep us patient and faithful, with the courage to push away idols that will separate us from you. Amen.