

Most of us realize that enjoying anything other than God, from the best gift to the basest pleasure, can become idolatry. Paul says in Colossians 3:5, "*Covetousness is idolatry.*"

"Covetousness" means desiring something other than God in the wrong way. But what does that mean—"in the wrong way"?

The reason this matters is both vertical and horizontal. Idolatry will destroy our relationship with God. And it will destroy our relationships with people.

All human relational problems—from marriage and family to friendship to neighbors to classmates to colleagues—all of them are rooted in various forms of idolatry, that is, wanting things other than God in wrong ways.

So here is my effort to think biblically about what those wrong ways are. What makes an enjoyment idolatrous? What turns a desire into covetousness, which is idolatry?

1. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is forbidden by God.* For example, adultery and fornication and stealing and lying are forbidden by God. Some people at some times feel that these are pleasurable, or else we would not do them. No one sins out of duty. But such pleasure is a sign of idolatry.
2. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is disproportionate to the worth of what is desired.* Great desire for non-great things is a sign that we are beginning to make those things idols.
3. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not permeated with gratitude.* When our enjoyment of something tends to make us not think of God, it is moving toward idolatry. But if the enjoyment gives rise to the feeling of gratefulness to God, we are being protected from idolatry. The grateful feeling that we don't deserve this gift or this enjoyment, but have it freely from God's grace, is evidence that idolatry is being checked.
4. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not see in God's gift that God himself is more to be desired than the gift.* If the gift is not awakening a sense that God, the Giver, is better than the gift, it is becoming an idol.
5. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is starting to feel like a right, and our delight is becoming a demand.* It may be that the delight is *right*. It may be that another person *ought* to give you this delight. It may be right to *tell* them this. But when all this rises to the level of angry demands, idolatry is rising.
6. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it draws us away from our duties.* When we find ourselves spending time pursuing an enjoyment, knowing that other things, or people, should be getting our attention, we are moving into idolatry.
7. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it awakens a sense of pride that we can experience this delight while others can't.* This is especially true of delights in religious things, like prayer and Bible reading and ministry. It is wonderful to enjoy holy things. It is idolatrous to feel proud that we can.
8. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is oblivious or callous to the needs and desires of others.* Holy enjoyment is aware of others' needs and may temporarily leave a good pleasure to help another person have it. One might leave private prayer to be the answer to someone else's.
9. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not desire that Christ be magnified as supremely desirable through the enjoyment.* Enjoying anything but Christ (like his good gifts) runs the inevitable risk of magnifying the gift over the Giver. One evidence that idolatry is not happening is the earnest desire that this not happen.
10. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not working a deeper capacity for holy delight.* We are sinners still. It is idolatrous to be content with sin. So we desire transformation. Some enjoyments shrink our capacities of holy joy. Others enlarge them. Some go either way, depending on how we think about them. When we don't care if an enjoyment is making us more holy, we are moving into idolatry.
11. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when its loss ruins our trust in the goodness of God.* There can be sorrow at loss w/out being idolatrous. But when the sorrow threatens our confidence in God, it signals the thing lost was becoming an idol.
12. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when its loss paralyzes us emotionally so that we can't relate lovingly to other people.* This is the horizontal effect of losing confidence in God. Again: Great sorrow is no sure sign of idolatry. Jesus had great sorrow. But when desire is denied, and the effect is the emotional inability to do what God calls us to do, the warning signs of idolatry are flashing.

For myself and for you, I pray the admonition of 1 John 5:21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."