The coronavirus first surfaced in a seafood and poultry market in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019. By spring of 2020 it had touched every corner of the globe. On March 11 the US government announced the restriction of travel from Europe to the United States for thirty days in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. A few days later the president would declare a national emergency and by the end of March the Senate would agree on a 2 Trillion-dollar stimulus package for Americans, the most far-reaching expensive measure in the history of Congress. Most of our plans for 2020 would look vastly different than we had expected, and the feelings of loss would be very real. Now I don’t believe that God caused this crisis, but I do believe he has used it to get our attention. With worshippers confined to their homes many people who had never attended church started watching online. During this time tens of thousands of people discovered a relationship with Christ. I think another way God has used this time was to expose the idols in our lives. For instance, in a matter of days we saw potential idols stripped away. The idol of independence.It felt like overnight all of our personal freedoms to go where we wanted and do what we wanted were restricted. The idol of academics. Schools and universities across America immediately shut down classroom attendance. The idol of money. The economy tanked as businesses barely survived or were forced to shut down and we saw the stock market drop 35% in less than a month. The idol of sports. Nearly every major sporting event in the United States was suspended or canceled, including the 2020 Olympics. The idol of travel. Leisure and short-term vacation plans became almost nonexistent. I had 4 trips planned and three of the flights were immediately canceled. The idol of entertainment. Hollywood stopped filming, Broadway shut down and movie theaters were shuttered. Disney World and other theme parks all closed. Restaurants and bars were reduced to carry-out only. The entire entertainment world came to a screeching halt. Then there’s the idol of politics. 2020 was an election year, and many states postponed their primaries, and campaign rallies from both parties were canceled. Then there’s the idol of religion. Churches across America closed their doors and instead streamed their services online. Or the idol of Science. Modern medicine struggled to come up with an antidote to fight the virus and they were unsure how to even help dying patients. Now please understand there’s nothing inherently wrong with any of these things. And yet while they often garner our affection, we need to understand they cannot ever meet the needs of our destitute heart. Jesus said, Matt. 6:33NLT. Listen we don’t think of there being idols in the twenty-first century, but idolatry is actually a very common problem in our world today. Tim Keller defines an idol as “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” That’s such a great description of an idol, “anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God.” Paul describes it in Romans 1:25NLT. Instead of loving God with all of our hearts, we love material things, and consequently our affections are out of order. Biblically, we call those things idols, but psychologically we call them addictions or habits. An idol is an addiction or bad habit you have formed in your life. Paul writes, 1 Cor. 12:2 NCV. If you ignore this habit, not only will it hurt your relationship with God, but it will begin to consume your time, your money, your energy, your affection, and your thought life. Idolatry is a major theme of the Bible, more than fifty of the laws in the first five books of the Bible are aimed at idolatry. It was one of only four sins to which the death penalty was attached. So if idolatry is considered that big of a problem in Scripture, don’t you think we should pay attention to the warnings? While idolatry is spoken of all throughout Scripture, the reference that immediately comes to my mind is when Moses came off the mountain with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. (Listen to the first three commandments, 1. You shall have no other gods before me. 2. You shall make no idols. 3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.) Guys He didn’t give us these first three commandments because he wants to be the first among many gods, He gave us these commandments because he wants to be the *only* God in our lives. God created us to be in relationship with him and him alone. I love the way Kyle Idelman says it in his book *Gods at War*: (God declines to sit atop an organizational flowchart… He is the organization. He is not interested in being president of the board… He is the board. And life doesn’t work until everyone else sitting around the table in the boardroom of your heart is fired. He is God, and there are no other applicants for that position. There are no partial gods, no honorary gods, no interim gods, no assistants to the regional gods. God is saying this not because he is insecure but because it’s the way of truth in this universe, which is his creation. Only one God owns and operates it. Only one God designed it, and only one God knows how it works. He is the only God who can help us, direct us, satisfy us, save us. God created us to worship him and him alone.) While God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the people waiting below were complaining because they thought it was taking too long. They gathered everyone’s gold and made a golden calf to worship. When Moses returned and saw their worship of idols, he was so angered at them he shattered the tablets with the Ten Commandments. Here’s the irony of what they did, instead of trusting their Creator, they decide to make a god of their own creation, and they were doing this at the very same time God was giving Moses the first commandment, Exodus 20:3NLT. Listen friends God hates idolatry and is unwilling to share the praise he deserves with another. Isaiah 42:8NCV. In 1 Cor. 6 Paul tells us that we are no longer our own, but we have been bought with a price, which was Christ’s death on the cross. And now God expects our full devotion, not a partial, lukewarm commitment. God wants us to be ‘all in’ when it comes to our relationship with him. There are so many stories in the Old Testament about idolatry, but even as you move to the New Testament, idolatry continues to be a theme. Col. 3:5NLT. Idolatry is an issue of the heart. Paul tells us that it starts with greed. Greed is this excessive desire for more… more wealth or more possessions. It’s very common to put other things before God to fill our selfish gratification. Let me give you a couple of examples. Think about your cell phone. According to a study by RescueTime, most people spend over 3 hours a day on their phones. The top 20 percent of smart- phone users actually spend more than 4.5 hours a day on their phones. On average, people check their phones 58 times during the day. There is little doubt that excessive cell phone use has become a problem in our society. At the end of 2019, Pew Research Center reported that 81 percent of Americans owned smartphones, and over the past five years, Google Trends indicates that searches for “cell phone addiction” have been on the rise. The dangers of using a cell phone while driving are widely known, yet people continue to ignore the risk and use their phones. It used to be when you saw someone swerving in the road you would think they are drunk. Today we immediately think they must be on their phone. There’s little doubt that cell phone use has become an idol for a lot of people. Another example of idolatry is sports. In fact sports might just be the biggest idol in America today. It’s hard for anyone to deny the love affair we have with sports. Take the National Football League, for example. Since 1972 the NFL has dominated the playing field as the favorite spectator sport of Americans. In 2018 the NFL brought in roughly $16 billion in revenue, from television deals to ticket sales and merchandising, a lot of money changes hands. Now please understand I’m not trying to criticize sports or football; I love the game. I’m just observing what is happening when we allow it to become the focus of our passion. For the last ten years Sandy and I have split season tickets to the Indianapolis Colts with another couple, I really enjoy going to a game. I love the energy in the room when sixty thousand people are all together on their feet cheering on their favorite team. At a game you may not know the people sitting around you, but it doesn’t stop you from giving high fives and hugs to everyone nearby when your team scores. And the fans have paid a lot of money for their seat. They will gather for three hours and then be excited if the game goes into overtime! Not only will they put up with the crowds and traffic, but they might even drive an hour or two just to get to the stadium. And many of them arrive a couple hours early just so they can tailgate with friends before the game starts. One Sunday Sandy and I were late for a 1:00 p.m. game. (The pastor was overly long-winded that day.) Our parking spot is about four blocks from the stadium, and it was cold, raining, and extremely windy. As Sandy and I made our way towards the stadium. I couldn’t believe I was willing to go through all of this just to watch a game. I said to Sandy, “I wonder how many Christians would go through these same conditions to get to church.” I’m just making the point we live in a land where sports in general compete for our attention and our affections. And it’s not just football, it could anything from golf to baseball, to running or NASCAR or any other athletic event. But again guys I want you to understand that sports are not the problem—it’s only when we allow them to consume our devotion. So I’m not saying you have to take sports out of your life—or money, or fame, or your phone as far as that goes. I’m just saying you can’t get rid of an idol in your life until you first own it. To admit this area has become way to important in your life. You could start by asking yourself a few of these questions like (where do I spend a lot of my money? What’s the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning? What would I have a hard time letting go of for an entire month? What do I like to talk about?) If your answer is the same to most of these questions, then it’s likely that area has become an idol. So consider taking these steps. Step 1, Work on your relationship with God. We were created by God to be in fellowship with him, to worship him. Within our soul is this God-sized hole or emptiness that was intended to be filled with a relationship with Christ. On the other hand, we have this independent spirit, or what we call the flesh, that wants to go its own way and do its own thing. And rather than surrender our life to the Lord, we try to fill the emptiness with created things, with things that we think will satisfy us or give us significance. It’s those type of things that become idols or bad habits in our life. And for a short while they seem to satisfy this void, but eventually those things will leave us just as empty as we were before. Listen God created us to worship something. And we will worship that which we value the most. And when fortune, fame, or family, become what we value the most we will worship them instead of God. Now guys I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with these things, unless those things have become more important to us than God and then it becomes an idol. So am I supposed to get rid of my money or fame or family? No… the solution is to grow in your love for the Lord. To put God back on the throne of your life. The more you are in love with God the more it shoves everything else aside and fills that God-sized vacuum with his presence. Paul said, Phil. 3:10NIV. Step 2, Set Boundaries. When I married Sandy, I entered into a covenant relationship with her. I made a commitment before God, my family, my friends—and more importantly my mother-in-law, to be faithful to her, to love and cherish her, till death do us part. I made a promise that there would be no other women in my life except for her. And, therefore, I established boundaries so that I would remain faithful to her. But what if I were to ignore those boundaries and decided to have an adulterous affair with someone else? Of course, it would break her heart because I broke my vow my commitment to her. Oh I could argue that this woman didn’t mean that much to me, but I would be missing the point. Sandy would remind me that I promised there would never be any other women in my life. And even if she were to forgive me, it would take a lot of work to rebuild a healthy marriage. I would have to reestablish those boundaries. Well guys idolatry is a lot like adultery. When I invited Christ into my life, I entered into a covenant relationship with him. I promised to be faithful to him and that there would be no other gods in my life. I established boundaries and promised to be faithful to him, and to be all in when it comes to my commitment to him. But if I were to allow an idol in my life it would break his heart because I broke my commitment to be faithful to Him. And if I were to argue that this idol was not as important to me as he was, I would again be missing the point because I promised there would be no other gods in my life. Of course, God is a forgiving God, and if I want my relationship with him then I need to once again make him the priority of my life. I need to reestablish some spiritual disciplines like spending more time with God in prayer and the Word, spending more time in worship and thanksgiving to make sure my heart was again focused on Him. Reestablishing boundaries is a declaration of my love and commitment to God. It’s a practical way of saying, “I love you, God, with all of my heart, mind, soul, and strength. And I have established some guardrails to keep my focus on you.” So begin to make a list of all the boundaries you need to establish to make sure your relationship with Christ is always healthy and free of idols. Step 3, Prioritize confession and accountability. Find a friend, a pastor, or a counselor, someone that you can trust. Ask that person if he or she would be willing to hold you accountable, to be that person who is not afraid to ask you the hard questions. James 5:16NIV. Once you know who that person is, tell him or her about this idol in your life. We all need someone to help us defeat this habit. Prov. 27:17NASB. Accountability is the best way to make sure you break this habit in your life. Step 4, Make Hard Choices. In step 2, I said the solution is not always to remove the object of our idolatry; the solution is to grow in our love for the Lord! And yet I also believe there are times that’s just not enough. In other words, no matter how hard you try to shift your devotion to the Lord, you can’t seem to stop the worship of this habit that has a hold on you. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told men to gouge out their eye to destroy the idol of lust. Matt. 5:29NLT. Now, he doesn’t literally mean for you to gouge out your eye, but he does want you to recognize what a serious problem idolatry can be in your life. In other words, do you need to make some hard choices? Have your friends pulled you away from God? Maybe you need to find some new friends? Has social media become an idol? Maybe you need to close your account? Has lust become an idol? Maybe you need a filter on your internet? Has the accumulation of wealth become an idol? Maybe you need to downsize? Guys I don’t know what hard decision you need to make, but if this area of your life has become an idol and you can’t seem to replace it with your love and devotion to God, then you need to make the hard choice. Jesus gave the example of trying to worship both God and money. He said, Matt. 6:24NIV. So friends stop making excuses for it, be honest with yourself, name the idol, repent of it, and ask for help. Pray