

3. iLove: the addictive affections of the human being

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[0 : 00] I'd be glad if you'd turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 1 for our first reading this evening. You'll find that in the Church Bibles on page 939.

I'm going to read from verse 8. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. That is, we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

[1 : 25] I'm under obligation both to the Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made, so they are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened, claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[2 : 52] Our second reading is from Psalm 135, and we're going to read this psalm out loud all together. Psalm 135, you'll find it in the Church Bibles on page 519.

Let me just give you a moment to turn to that psalm, and then we'll encourage one another by reading these words together. Psalm 135.

Together. Praise the Lord. Praise the name of the Lord. Give praise, O servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God.

Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good. Sing to his name, for it is pleasant, for the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession.

For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

[4 : 15] He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain, and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and of beast, who in your midst, O Egypt, sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants, who struck down many nations and killed mighty kings, Sion, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan, and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to his people Israel.

Your name, O Lord, endures forever. Your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak. They have eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them.

[5 : 42] O house of Israel, bless the Lord. O house of Aaron, bless the Lord. O house of Levi, bless the Lord.

You who fear the Lord, bless the Lord. Bless the Lord from Zion. He who dwells in Jerusalem, praise the Lord.

Amen. Let's pray briefly as we come to God's word. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much as we've prayed already for your word in our own language. And we pray that you would help us to give our attention to your word this evening, to hear what you are saying to us.

And we pray for the work of your spirit among us that you give to us obedient hearts and lives in response to what we hear. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Quickly, put your hand up if you've been online within this last week. Yeah, all right. A fair number. I thought that would be the case.

[6 : 45] Welcome to the third in our series, Thinking About the Gospel and the Online World. This week, I love the addictive affections of the human being.

We're looking this week at the dark side of the online world. It's an area we're all familiar enough with. There are things online that most people recognize as dangerous.

The pornography, the gambling, there are other areas that are not usually recognized as dangerous but are more subtly ensnaring. That's the territory we're in this evening.

You'll find a handout you should have been given on the way in. It'll encourage you that we're making progress and also help you afterwards to reflect on the many different Bible passages we're going to be looking at briefly this evening.

Before we get to any of that, let me start with something more positive, namely, the image of God. Turn back in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1, please.

[7 : 47] One of the most striking things the Bible says about human beings is that we are creatures made in God's image. Genesis chapter 1, verse 26, Then God said, Let us make man in our image.

And had you been around to see our first ancestors there in action before the fall, you would have looked at the way that they lived and the things that they did and the way that they spoke and said to yourself, you know, the way they do that is so like their loving father.

inside the created order and yet they bear the stamp of the great God who is outside the created order. They're in his image, after his likeness, in a way that nothing else does.

And even though that reflection of God's character, God's rule, is spoiled since the fall in Genesis 3, it's not obliterated.

Turn on, for example, to Genesis chapter 9. And look at verse 6. God talking to Noah after the flood.

[9 : 08] Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. There's still something image of God-like about humanity, even after the fall and the flood.

And just as our first ancestors perfectly reflected God's character, so we, who still bear his image, although spoiled, are reflecting beings.

We know this to be true just from observation. There is a mirror-like quality to us as human beings. We absorb things and reflect them back, especially things that interest us.

Most of all, people that we love and respect. We're great copiers of others. Children of parents. You won't believe it, children, but the older you get, the more like your parents you'll become.

That may not encourage you, but it's true. You reflect them in unavoidable ways. And athletes respect their sporting heroes and fans respect and reflect the stars that they love and all that kind of thing.

[10 : 25] So if you see a middle-aged guy, slightly overweight, black, black, slicked back hair, big dark glasses, spangled jacket, slightly curled lip, you know there is a man who loves Elvis.

He reflects the one he loves. Now, this reflecting thing is not just a random, interesting happening. It's part of the way we're made.

What we love, we reflect. And it's not an incidental little thing about us either. Because what we reflect ultimately determines the people we are and the destiny we participate in.

It's an important thing. And here we move on to the subject of idolatry. Idolatry is one of the biggest ideas in the Bible.

It's one of the most important terms in the Bible used to describe how human sinfulness works. If it's unfamiliar to you, just hang in there.

[11 : 31] We'll fill in that idea a bit as we go along this evening. And to do that, let's turn to Psalm 135 that we read just a moment ago. Psalm 135, as you'll know, is a great song of praise to God for his goodness, his greatness, his rescuing power, his splendid name and reputation.

And towards the end of the psalm, the great God of Israel is contrasted with the idols of the nations. Look at verse 15. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths that do not speak. They have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths.

And here is the chilling end. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them.

No matter how you're made, you come to resemble the thing you worship, the thing you love, the thing you trust in. You make idols, you worship them, you become like them.

[12 : 52] And the chilling idea is not just that idols misrepresent the true God, which of course they do. He can speak, he can see, he can hear, he can do things and they can't do any of those things.

Now it's the human image of God, the idolater, comes to resemble not the glorious creator in whose image he is made, but the idol he makes for himself.

The blindness that the idol has, the idolater shares. The deafness that the idol has, the idolater shares. The muteness that the idol has, the idolater shares.

The falsehood, ultimately the lifelessness that the idol has, the idolater participates in. idolatry it's one of those reflecting images things in the bible now let's turn on to a different sort of reflecting altogether turn over to the new testament to corinthians chapter three here's a different kind of reflecting the lord jesus christ is described in the bible as the image of the invisible god and people who believe his gospel are able to see him properly to understand who he really is the glorious lord and here paul describes how the person who sees jesus clearly in the gospel will in the end be like him chapter three verse 18 we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the lord who is the spirit in short you can become like your earthly idols dead blind dumb useless fit for nothing but destruction or like your heavenly lord resurrected eternally alive and glorified there really are only these two destinies for human beings to become like your creator and redeemer reflecting his glory transformed into his character inhabiting his new world sharing his new life or to become like these spiritually inanimate alternatives a person who mirrors dead things someone who goes down to the grave where the dead things are someone who shares in the fate of a dying old creation this then is the big idea of our sermon this evening you come to resemble that which you love and you share its destiny inescapably one or the other and we human beings have enormous capacity for loving things enormous capacity turn back to genesis chapter 3 we spent a lot of time in this chapter in this short series and we will continue to do so because it's fundamentally important to understanding who we are as human beings now in genesis chapter 3 in these first few verses there are many subtle and important things that happen but i want to draw your attention to one thing that adam and eve do in this story they do what paul refers to in romans 1 as exchanging the glory of the immortal god for images from the created world let me read the first few verses the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the lord god had made he said to the woman did god actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden and the woman said to the serpent we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden but god said you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that's in the midst of the garden neither should you touch it lest you die but the serpent said to the woman you will not surely die

for god knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you'll be like god knowing good and evil these people exchange the truth about their glorious creator and themselves as his creatures for a deceptively reduced view of god and a deceptively elevated view of themselves in their minds in a few short sentences of dialogue god is made small and they are made big let's look at the first a reduced image of god think how small god is made to look in this brief dialogue he's made to look ungenerous did god really say you mustn't eat from any tree he's made to look deceitful oh you will not surely die he was lying when he said that he's made to look mean and inhibiting actually god knows that you could become like him that's why he lied in a few short sentences the serpent paints a diminished contracted shriveled up picture of god which against all the evidence they believe in the same way they buy into a hugely elevated view of themselves up to this point they've been happy to be dependent creatures of a generous heavenly father but listen what he suggests to them you could compete you know that's why he kept you from that tree he was holding you back keeping you in your keeping you in your place and they behave as though they really are in a position to call the shots look at verse 6 so when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise she took of its fruit and ate and she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate they become the point of reference in their world she looks she sees it looks good she's been told it's not good but she looks and sees and she thinks well it's pretty good actually no longer are they listening to the word of their creator they mere creatures have become the judges of the world they buy into a small view of God and an expanded view of themselves their being and living is meant to reflect the character of the great God who made them the one outside of the created order now their being and living merely reflects a distorted caricatured blown up view of themselves they choose to be infatuated with this exaggerated self image rather than being preoccupied with something altogether more appropriate the true view of their creator so the essence of human sin is not just disobedience and it's not just disbelief it's that the object of their attention and affection has profoundly changed no longer are we naturally attracted by and eager to reflect the glorious reality of our generous creator instead we are attracted by mere created things especially ourselves and the bible's

[21 : 39] word for that is idolatry of course in many times and in various ways idolatry has been expressed by the literal bowing down to physical objects but it is a much bigger and much more subtle thing than that at the heart of idolatry is not a physical thing but an abstract thing where do we get our sense of significance from where do we get our sense of security and meaning from idolatry is all about a sense of significance and security from created things rather than from god and we naturally gravitate towards things that give us a sense of security or significance and of course many things can do that some things make you feel secure because they give you a sense of pleasure physical or mental another thing can make you feel secure or significant because it gives you a sense of meaning in life makes you seem as though you're useful and purposeful other things may give a sense of security by conveying a feeling of control a feeling of being less vulnerable and not surprisingly we come to love things that make us feel significant or secure they shape our lives we think about them we invest in them we become preoccupied with them often obsessed by them we love them our lives revolve around them we come to reflect them that's what idolatry is all about and love is the most appropriate word for this how do we express love for people well we give them our time we give them our finance our mental energies our imagination our dreams our hopes our cravings our energies are all tied up with the people we love the things we love we desire we talk about we boast about guess what i did this weekend i had such a good time doing the thing that i love doing whatever it is the thing i live for each week the thing i look forward to some of the things that human beings love are particularly self-destructive we tend to call those addictions often our addictive loves are things that pay out in various bodily sensations so food sex alcohol all have big physical payouts and can be very destructive but there are addictions that don't pay out physically in quite that way but are just as destructive the rush the excitement of gambling for example it's not physically addictive but it certainly has sensory payouts many of the things we love no one would call addictions at all and yet though not obviously so destructive they're no less powerful i can think offhand of lives controlled by love for imaginary worlds the person for example who every week gets a stack of novels from the library and lives for being able to live in imaginary worlds i can think of lives controlled by golf would you believe bowls music stock market investment family gardening home improvement care to mention it you can nearly always find an example of someone driven by

that as a central part of their lives anything the thing that our mind flies to the moment it's not occupied in something else what do you love many of those things are not inherently wrong are they just alternative givers of security loved so much sometimes because they're acting as a god substitute can i say it is not wrong to derive some sense of security or significance from created things for example we feel insecure without food and rightly so or without shelter or without friendship and these are god given needs and comforts god does not only comfort us with his words but by his gifts the things he so generously gives to us all the time it would be perverse if we were not comforted or made to feel secure or significant in some measure by these ordinary everyday things it's when the creator's gifts the good things he's given eclipse him in our affections when we love the gifts more than the giver when instead of loving the giver we love his gifts as though they didn't come from him or he wasn't even there we gravitate towards the things we love we become like them in certain ways some of them are god given some of them are homemade in fact we make many things to love that are expressions of ourselves but it's easy for us to love them rather than our generous father to love the creator sorry the creature rather than the creator to value them more than him to value this world with all its visible things good and bad more than the world to come and in the end to share the destiny of this fallen world rather than the life of the world to come now let's come to our particular subject which is the virtual world world the digital world the online world can

I say that the addictions of humanity are well represented online the obvious ones pornography gambling I mentioned last week second life the virtual reality that you can go home and inhabit on your computer apparently statistically nearly always the first thing that people try when they start on second life is sexual expression it's just where they go now I'm not going to go into lots of details about specifics suffice to say that online gives you instant access in your living room on your phone on your iPad to powerful and highly destructive idolatries and you ought not to go online unaware of that there are the obvious ones of course things that are not good for you things that because of their instant sensory or psychological rewards are dangerous and ensnaring a couple of non online examples to illustrate for a moment there is a reason that controlled drugs are controlled they're often very good for you in the right place in the right setting but not good all over the place take heroin for example in its medical setting it's known as diamorphine it's the most exceptional painkiller around but it is not good all over the place it's highly destructive sexual desire is a

God-given gift it's a meant to be controlled God-given gift leave it lying around all over the place and it can be terribly damaging and ensnaring some things are pretty much always dangerous there is a reasoning that gambling there is a reason that gambling is controlled some things are not always dangerous but let me say that online gives you instant access to plenty of the obvious ones and it would be stupid to go unprepared surveys of Christians and pornography all come to the same conclusion that about a third of people surveyed are addicts or regular accesses of porn online amongst younger people the figures are even higher for men higher than women and for those in church leadership the figures are no different than for those than from those in their congregations that means that you have almost certainly if you've been online seen porn currently use it or will be exposed to you to it in the near future it is no help whatever to be naive here if you're online without some sort of protection content filtering accountability something you are a fool there are good reasons for keeping yourself away from things that are bad for you good reasons an excellent book that I want to recommend on this subject is by Tim Chester it's called captured by a better vision he writes this when you look at porn whether it's a still image or a movie you need to look beyond the frame within the frame you see a beautiful smiling woman or a couple enjoying amazing sex but think what's happening outside the frame see the film crew gathered around the makeup artists the plastic surgeons the image editors see the drugs and the suicides just off screen there are women throwing up taking drugs committing suicide look beyond the frame see the warping of your view of sex of your wife of your sisters in Christ see the damage to your relationship with God and your service of his people see God's wrath against your sin look beyond the frame now it's highly likely that there are a good number here seriously ensnared in this if you are you'll have found that not only is it damaging but it is isolating it is a lonely place to be can I say to you help is available do not be on your own out there perhaps the best thing you can do to start with is talk to a friend that you trust about it you'll find your friend probably struggles in this area too a good friend of mine a little while ago talking about his own struggles in a related area not this particular one said just in the process of talking about it its grip was weakened talk to a friend someone you trust there are the obvious ones but let me say there are some less obvious ones out there as well I mentioned earlier on that one of the big things that happens in

Genesis 3 is the inflation of the human image and online it's possible to portray yourself as you'd like to think of yourself and as you'd like to be thought of it's possible to big yourself up online I've come across a number of examples recently of people whose lives have been destroyed not by pornography but by online gaming playing games being an imaginary person online and relating in the virtual world you pick the character you control the action you are who you reveal yourself to be the reinforcement of an inflated self sense of self in online gaming is very strong indeed and so it's no surprise to find that massive destructive addiction issues have been reported all over the world in relation to games like Halo, Call of Duty, StarCraft, World of Warcraft. World of Warcraft currently has about 11 million subscribers on the online worldwide I've come across in the last few years at least a couple of marriages that have fallen apart largely because of World of Warcraft gaming and for no other reason there are the obvious ones but there are also the less obvious ones we've already said that pleasure meaning control all of these can give a false sense of security or significance to a human being and the virtual world gives massive opportunity for things that give pleasure significance and control think of such insignificant things as instant messaging just saying hi but but it can convey a sense of significance someone sends me a text

[35 : 30] I feel I'm loved if lots of people say hi by text that makes me feel very significant indeed or think of online shopping think of online shopping now let me tell you if you've not done your Christmas shopping online now is the time to repent it is the business once upon a time Christmas shopping took days and hours and was exceptionally stressful now all you need to do is make a list and let me assure you you can cover it in an hour everyone friends family everyone and you never even have to handle the packages you can order them have them wrapped send them to their destination it's wonderful I'd recommend it to anyone but let me say there's more to it than just efficiency am I the only one who gets a real buzz from being able to go online for an hour and do the whole thing and just with a few clicks of a mouse get my gift sent all over my world to the people I want to send them to enormously self-aggrandizing that if you let it be well think of the time invested in online things time that most precious of human commodities think of the time spent browsing messaging shopping learning even think of the time I think of students who didn't get their degrees because they just spent their time online it must be delivering rewards of some sort mustn't it mental interest and engagement a sense of significance a sense of power why must I go online does it make me feel important all that information at my fingertips does it make me feel more or less aware of my creator all that time online does it make me feel more or less aware of my redeemer the Lord Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself for me is that what I gain online or is it something else and did you find that your time online this week expanded your vision of who God was and your vision of his work in the world and your sense of purposefulness in belonging to him your creator and redeemer did you come away from your big online time feeling more purposeful about the gospel our time is gone of course it's true that what we find online simply shows us things that have always been there false loves are nothing new for human beings although perhaps newly accessible in certain ways there are many things to love there are illegitimate things that are always wrong to love and there are good things that we love inappropriately significantly but nothing in the whole of the created order is big enough to be a fitting ultimate love for a human being made in God's image nothing is big enough to satisfy your love within the scope of the world that you can see and feel and touch there's nothing big enough out there to be big enough for you to love

properly nothing in the created order is significant enough for that if you live for your work that won't be big enough if you live for your family that won't be big enough if you live for your career medicine the law whatever it happens to be that won't be big enough if you live for your hobbies music whatever it has is you happen to be infatuated with that won't be big enough nothing will be big enough for you because you're a human being made in the image of God made to reflect his glory made to love him made to share his life made to share the destiny of your great rescuer the Lord Jesus Christ nothing else is big enough for you don't be satisfied with anything smaller than us let's pray together listen to the Apostle Paul's description of the

Lord Jesus Christ he is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible with the thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities all things were created through him and for him and he's before all things and in him all things hold together and he's the head of his body the church he's the beginning the firstborn from the dead that in everything he might be preeminent for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven making peace by the blood of his cross we thank you gracious God for having made us in your image having given us as part of that a huge capacity for loving things and we pray that you'd help us by your grace to love the right things namely to love you to love your son the image of the invisible God the one who gave himself to make peace between idolaters like us and you the great

God and so we pray that you would fix our attention on him and in him that you would help us to love you not merely the things that you have made help us we pray in Jesus name Amen