

Jesus is Better

*IDOLATRY, TEMPTATION, AND THE
CHALLENGE OF BEING A TEENAGER IN
A DISENCHANTED WORLD*

**20 DEVOTIONALS FOR TEENS,
FAMILIES & LEADERS**

LUCAS SHIPMAN

Jesus is Better:

*Idolatry, Struggle, and the Challenge of Being a Teenager in a
Disenchanted World*

by

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Introduction for Families and Leaders

The greatest enemy to a teenager's soul is not outside them, but *inside* them.

Sinful desires and idolatry give birth to death. At the end of the journey of following Jesus is eternal joy in his presence – at the end of the journey worshiping idols is eternal death.

Christian parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, and student pastors often share a common goal. They want the children under their care to go out into the world with a Christian Worldview, but worldview training is often centered on “apologetics,” the defense of the Christian faith. I support teaching teenagers the logical and evidential reasons for our faith. We *should* teach our teenagers why naturalism is a faulty way to view the universe. We *should* teach our kids that the Bible is not, in fact, anti-woman or pro-slavery. We *should* teach our kids the reasons why we can trust the 66 books of the Bible, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, and the overwhelming proof our universe was designed. These topics should come up in every home, youth group, and Christian school. **However, apologetics training is not enough for teenagers. Developing a Christian Worldview involves more than apologetics.**

Your kids are not being “argued” out of the church by anti-Christian philosophers. Their hearts are being captured by other stories and desires. **Simply put, they are being influenced and persuaded to worship idols**

instead of Jesus. That is why we are seeing youth leave the church in record numbers.¹

This devotional is not a worldview or apologetics curriculum. Its intention is to address some of the most common idols young people struggle with daily.

I want to help you prepare their hearts for whatever occurs in their lives. I want this devotional, with its daily questions and Biblical readings, to inspire real conversations to take place. My hope is the Gospel will speak to their hearts, sins will be confessed and repented of, and their newfound faith will lead to improved lives.

My family and I help kids overcome their past circumstances to become all that God created them to be. We've done this important work on a beautiful, 500-acre Christian boarding school campus, right outside of the DFW metroplex, for almost 50 years. I've been a pastor, youth leader, teacher, and "discipler" of teenagers for a large part of my adult life. I'm excited to go on this journey with you to identify and eliminate, with God's help, some "idols" in your teenager's heart.

****Some of the best work done in the world of Christian apologetics include the CSB Apologetics Study Bible for Students and books by William Lane Craig, Paul Gould, Sean McDowell, and J. P. Moreland. Check them out and give copies to your kids or students.****

¹ LifeWay Research, 2019 <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>

Introduction for Students

What is an idol? Most people envision a statue made of stone or gold, and they have a picture in their mind with ancient people bowing down before it. While there have been these kinds of idols in the past, the word “idol” encompasses a great deal more.

In today’s world, many people might think that the word “idol” is a positive thing, as in the TV show, “American Idol”. Talented young people all working hard to become famous for their singing ability. In fact, many of the things we might “idolize” can be good things that God has provided – fame, money, or power – if they are viewed as gifts from God to be used for the good of others. A famous and rich person with power can use his or her wealth and position to help others, to bring important issues to light, and to build up a community for the good of everyone. When a gift from God becomes an “idol,” it is because we raise its importance above God. It takes priority in our life. When we are happy or sad, instead of going toward God, we move toward the things we have placed above Him and turned into idols. We sacrifice our time and energy for them. We give our emotions over to them and their pursuit. We try to find fulfillment in them. They become a large part of our identity.

Humans were created to worship God, and striving to fill that need with other things – money, sex, popularity, religion, physical fitness and appearance, entertainment – will leave a hole in your heart that can never be satisfied.

The Bible has many warnings about greed and the most common idols related to it - Greed fuels the worship of many idols:

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.²

Colossians 3:5

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.³

Proverbs 15:27

The greedy bring ruin to their households . . .⁴

Proverbs 28:25

The greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the LORD will prosper.⁵

1 Corinthians 10:14⁶

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

When you desire something more than God, it can quickly become an idol in your life. Unlike God, your Creator, idols are not perfect. They will not be forever faithful to you. They won't last forever. And they will not satisfy you. There will always be:

² 1 Tim 6:10 (NIV).

³ Col 3:5 (NIV).

⁴ Prov 15:27 (NIV).

⁵ Prov 28:25 (NIV).

⁶ 1 Cor 10:14 (NIV).

More money and things to strive after
A better friend to be found
A greater athletic achievement
A more perfect partner
A better job
A higher “high”
Another 1000 “followers”

Isaiah 44:9

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame.⁷

As we examine some of the more common things that people turn into idols, my hope is that you will come to understand at a young age that only your relationship with Jesus can provide true contentment and lead to eternal salvation. As you go through life, you will worship something. If not God, then you will constantly strive to find happiness in temporary things that turn into idols in your life. God wants you to have strong desires. He just wants them to be directed toward Him!

C.S. Lewis, in his book, **The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses**, says:

“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when

⁷ Isaiah 44:9 (NIV).

infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Meaningless idols can accept your time, talents, desires, and hard work as you look for fulfillment in them that will never come. It is because these idols can never give anything back to you. There can be no two way relationship, as you can have with your Creator.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.⁸

Remember that God is faithful and forever. He is perfect, and His plan for your life is as well.

There are no second-generation Christians. God has no grandchildren. The faith of your parents, grandparents, or mentors is not enough to save

⁸ Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV).

you. No one is "in" by default. Everyone is born into sin and needs a savior. Each of us has to repent, believe, and be born again.

As you go out into the world, your faith must be your own. The greatest danger to your soul is not the negative influence of an atheist professor or friend. The greatest danger to your soul is found within yourself and your own sinful desires.

If you are not a Christian, I pray you meet Jesus during this study. If you are a Christian, it is easy in today's world to be drawn away from the things that really matter. You might forget what Christ has done for you, find yourself believing another "story," and shift your desires away from the Lord. This shift can wreck your life

Every one of us has worshipped idols in our lives. We may not have bowed before a statue or sacrificed at a pagan altar, but we've done something worse. At times, we have sacrificed our relationships with people, by focusing on our own selfish desires.

When Jesus saves you, He starts a lifelong process of walking with you and helping you to grow in holiness. He will help you overcome the idols in your life. It might not be easy at times. Some of our idols have been given much time and attention, and even though we know they have never provided true happiness, they still have a hold on us. We think that the next thing we buy will make us happy. The next relationship will provide perfect bliss. The next "high" will fulfill us. Idols will never satisfy you. Jesus wants to set you free.

As we examine some of the idols we hold on to, think about how many times you have been disappointed in them, and do not go down the path of hoping a new idol might prove different.

Most of you would agree with this statement, "I am a sinner." However, knowing that fact is not enough to identify and destroy the idols that keep us from Jesus. They must be named, called out, and confessed, and when they are, I promise you Jesus' love will be better than any of those "idols."

The Idol of Religious Accomplishment

Church attendance cannot save your soul. The faith of your parents or grandparents cannot save your soul. Bible verse memory, attending a church, and getting baptized cannot save your soul. Those are all wonderful things, but apart from Jesus, those are meaningless. Walking with other believers is essential to growing in faith, but you won't "catch" salvation from them by proximity. The Father calls, Jesus saves, and the Spirit makes us alive. It sounds simple, but Judas spent a lot of time around some special people, yet his idols came before his relationship with Jesus.

In Philippians 3:4-6, the apostle Paul says that no one has a more impressive religious heritage than him:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.
(ESV)

He then calls his heritage rubbish. The Greek word he uses is even stronger than that. You've probably stepped in it if you've ever been to a farm. Verses 7-11:

*Indeed, I count **everything** as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For*

*his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as **rubbish**, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (ESV)*

Count whatever religious pedigree you come from as garbage compared to knowing Christ. Many confuse being religious with obeying Jesus. *You cannot earn your way to God. You do not deserve salvation.* The only way to be saved is by faith in Jesus' perfect work for you.

Charles Spurgeon said, "If your religion does not make you holy, it will damn you. It is simply painted pageantry to go to hell in." Thinking you are not as bad as Hitler does not satisfy the standard of holiness. Jesus is the standard of holiness. Some religions have a sliding scale of works, but Biblical Christianity says there is no holiness apart from Jesus. **Compare yourself to Scripture, not other Christians.** Christianity is not a new religion for you to try. Biblical Christianity is new birth! Good works come from a new heart that has been changed by God.

Further Reading in Scripture:

- John 3:1–21
- Philippians 3:4-6
- Colossians 2:23
- James 1:26

Reflection:

1. Do you believe you are “good with God” because you just try to be good? What does the Bible actually say about “new birth”? (It’s required to be a part of the Kingdom of God) Read John 3:1-21.
2. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *“For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works so that no one can boast.”* The Bible clearly teaches that those who trust in themselves (their good works, their family’s faith, their church attendance) are **not** saved. Only those who trust in Christ alone for their salvation **are saved**. Discuss this...
3. Have you personally turned from your sins and trusted (believed) that only Jesus can save you because of His sacrifice on the cross? Acts 3:19-20 says, *“Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out, that seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus, who has been appointed for you as the Messiah (anointed King over all).”*

Further Readings:

- Ferguson, Sinclair. *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.
- Greear, J. D. *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*. Nashville, TN: B & H Books, 2011.
- Vickers, Brian. *Justification by Grace Through Faith: Finding Freedom from Legalism, Lawlessness, Pride, and Despair*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2013.
- Washer, Paul. *The Gospel Call and True Conversion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013.

The Idol of Gender Identity

Some of you find your identity in your uniqueness: “I like these things,” “I’m good at this, and that makes me unique,” “I’m different,” etc. You may even believe that your gender identity makes you unique, and it defines who you are.

Sam Allberry has powerful insight:

[Jesus’] love entirely reshapes how we see ourselves...we tend to find our identity in who we love most. It is why sexuality has such a powerful effect on our identity. The sort of attractions we experience, and the sort of people we feel attracted to, easily form a key (or the key) to who we understand ourselves to be. Sexual identity has become a powerful force in Western society.⁹

He continues:

We have made sexuality the foundation to self-understanding. Sexual behavior has therefore become a primary means of self-expression. To restrict sexual behavior is to stop someone from being who they are.¹⁰

⁹Allberry, Sam. *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep with?* (Oxford: The Good Book Company, 2020), 102.

¹⁰Ibid.

Both homosexuality and transsexuality are dangers to the human soul. The percentage of U.S. adults who identify as LGBTQ+ has doubled over the past decade, from 3.5% in 2012 to 7.1% in 2021. People who identify as LGBTQ+ could make up 10 to 15% of the adult population "in the not too distant future" as Gen Z and millennials comprise an increasing share of the adult population, says Jeff Jones, the author of the Gallup poll to Axios.¹¹

I am not here to deny the legitimate feelings and attractions of LGBTQ+ identifying people. Let's focus on gender "identity," since it is in the news every day. Gender dysphoria is real and heartbreaking.

"This sense of a mismatch between physical sex and psychological gender is called gender dysphoria... they *deny* that gender identity is rooted in biology. Their argument is that gender is completely independent of the body."¹²

"The implication is that *the body does not matter*. It is not the site of the authentic self. Matter does not matter. All that matters is a person's inner feelings or sense of self... if the meaning of our sexuality is not something we derive *from* the body, then it becomes something we impose *on* the body."¹³

Condemnation, shame, and name-calling are antithetical to how the New Testament tells us to engage those in sin.

¹¹Jones, Jeff *Gallup poll* (Gallup, 2022)

¹²Pearcey, Nancy *Love Thy Body*, 30-31

¹³*Ibid.*

*But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. **Yet do this with gentleness and reverence, keeping a clear conscience,** so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. - 1 Peter 3:15-17(CSB)*

How can those who suffer from gender dysphoria find freedom from that false god and idol?

“Christianity assigns the human body a much richer dignity and value. Humans do not need freedom from the body to discover their true, authentic selves. **Rather we can celebrate our embodied existence as a good gift from God. Instead of escaping from the body, the goal is to live in harmony with it.**”¹⁴

Humans are embodied souls. To try and separate the two in regards to sexuality and gender breaks away from the good reality that God created. It is to live in a world where the feelings of the individual dictate reality, not where God dictates reality. Calling transsexuality what it is - gender dysphoria - is a good thing. As with any idol in this book, this may be wrapped around your identity. The thought of abandoning this way of seeing

¹⁴Pearcey, Nancy *Love Thy Body*

the world and living in it might terrify you. I invite you to read a story from a Christian who struggled with that as well: *Gay Girl, Good God* by Jackie Hill Perry.

Further Reading in Scripture:

- Genesis 1:26-27
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-20
- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Reflection:

1. Do you feel as though you are ruled by your sexual feelings?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-20.
3. Discuss the reality of elevated percentages of depression/anxiety and suicide amongst LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. Can you attribute these highly elevated numbers solely to cultural shame and pressure? Or might there be a spiritual weight to that lifestyle?

Further Readings:

- Allberry, Sam. *Is God Anti-gay?: And other questions about Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction*. Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2015.
- Comer, John Mark. *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies that Sabotage Your Peace*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2021.
- Pearcey, Nancy. *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018.

- Sprinkle, Preston. *Embodied: Transgender Identities, The Church, and What the Bible Has to Say*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2021.
- Yarhouse, Mark A. *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020.
- _____. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

The Idol of Worldly Accomplishments

Some of you find your identity in what you do...

I am an actor. It's WHO I AM.

I am an athlete. It's WHO I AM.

I am a scientist. It's WHO I AM.

I am a musician. It's WHO I AM.

This is a dangerous belief system. Does your value change in God's eyes according to your accomplishments? Does He love you more or less?

You could get into a car accident and become wheelchair-bound. You could get injured during a game, and your whole athletic career could be over. You could have a stroke tonight and have your cognitive functions impaired forever.

Some of you find your identity in how "good" you are. You show up to church. You obey your parents. You've never been drunk or smoked weed. But what happens when you screw up?

Some of you find your identity in your family. Your grandma has never missed a church service. You are a good, solid family. Your family is successful. What happens when that changes?

At any moment, you could become physically or mentally disabled, or your family could fall apart. What then? Who are you then? Are you any less human? The answer is, no. Your worth is not tied to your abilities, what you

accomplish, or where you come from. The idea that some human beings are worth more than others gave rise to slavery, the Holocaust, modern eugenics, and abortion “rights”.

Every human being, from womb to tomb, is valuable because they are made in the image of God -- “unwanted” or “planned,” average or below average, able or handicapped, young or old, male or female, no matter the skin color or family background.

Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.”

*So God created man
in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female.*

Without this foundation, who decides which humans have value In the 1930s, Nazis said Jewish lives had no value. Today’s Chinese government says Uyghur lives have no value. Modern western culture claims humans in their mother's wombs have no value.

All human life has value, not because of what the individual accomplishes or where they are from, but because their Creator, God, says so.

Further Reading in Scripture:

- Matthew 19:21
- 2 Corinthians 12:9
- Galatians 1:10
- Revelation 5 (see description of those around the throne in worship)

Reflection:

1. Do you find your identity in what you do? Or where (family/race/nation) you are from?
2. Have you ever thought negatively about a person just because of where they are from?
3. Read and Discuss: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-be-made-in-gods-image>

Further Readings:

- Horton, Michael. *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
- Keller, Timothy. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Pace, Scott. *Answering God's Calling: Finding, Following, and Fulfilling God's Will for Your Life*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020.
- Platt, David. *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010.
- Tozer, A. W. *Success and the Christian: The Cost of Spiritual Maturity*. Camps Hills, PA: Wingspread, 2006.

I hope you have found this devotional to be valuable for you and your family. This FREE download includes the first three chapters from my book, Jesus is Better — Idolatry, Temptation, And The Challenge Of Being A Teenager In Disenchanted World.

If you would like to receive a copy of the remaining seventeen chapters, please visit
www.HappyHillFarm.org/JesusIsBetter.