Which is Idolatry
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Col 3:5

(NA 27th ed.)	(ESV)
Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,	Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:
πορνείαν ἀκαθαρσίαν πάθος	sexual immorality, impurity, passion,
ἐπιθυμίαν κακήν,	evil desire,
καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν, ἥτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία	and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Many English words help with this vocabulary. You may recognize "necro" in "put to death." *Porniea* is "sexual immorality." "Cathartic" is a cleansing, thus a-catharsis is un-clean. *Pathos* is glossed passion in ESV but is negative, as in pathological or pathogen. *Epithumian* indicates strong desire. *Pleonexia* is a combination of *pleon* ("more") and *echein* ("to have"). Together they form the word for an excessive lust for more. You see that the last word is a combination of "idol" and "latria," i.e. idol worship.

The great sin of the Old Testament people of God—the root sin from which grew all manner of other sins—was idolatry, bowing down to wood and stone. In the New Testament, this is internalized. Idolatry is defined as setting one's heart on anything other than the true God. Paul spoke of those whose "god is their belly" (Phil 3:19). Jesus said that you can't serve God and mammon, showing that money competes with the worship of God in our hearts (Luke 16:13). Even in the Old Testament you can see this internalization of idolatry. Hab 1:11 says of the Chaldeans that their "own might is their god." The elders of Ezekiel's day had set up idols in their hearts (14:1 – 5). The "fear of man" is the opposite of the fear of God (Jer 17:5 – 8).

(Every good Reformed Presbyterian has heard Jer 17:9 used as a prooftext for total depravity, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can know it?" But this verse is actually about the fear of man as opposed to the fear of God. That is, how we tend to put people on pedestals and trust them instead of God. We become man-pleasers, not God-pleasers. This is how the heart is deceitful. See Gal 1:10; John 5:44, 12:43.)

Anyway, as a professor I wanted to be able to say that Paul labeled as idolatry all of the sins listed in our verse. That would have folded nicely into a lesson for my counseling class. I was explaining the inner dynamic of heart idolatry, how we tend to place our trust in created things rather than God. It is of this that we must repent, in order for the various sins that flow from it to be "put to death." But try as I might, I could not make the verse say what I wanted. Take a careful look at it. It cannot be construed to say that anything other than covetousness is idolatry. The clause is separated from the list of sins with a καί. The verb "to be" is singular. Bummer. I was disappointed that only covetousness is idolatry.

But then I got to thinking. What sorts of things can we covet? Well, what does the Tenth Commandment say (Exod 20:17)? (The Septuagint actually uses for "covet," *epithumeō*, "to strongly desire," like in line 3). You shall not covet your neighbor's house. Coveting that, according to Paul, is idolatry. To covet your neighbor's wife (or husband!) is idolatry. To covet possessions, or anything else that doesn't belong to you, is idolatry.

After realizing that, I was happy with the verse limiting idolatry to covetousness. What do you covet? What do you wish you had that God has not

given? Show me what you envy about your neighbor, and I will show you what competes with God in your heart.

Unlike you and me, Jesus honored God exclusively in his heart—and so he perfectly fulfilled the will of God and never sinned. And even now he is at work in you through his Spirit, moving you to become ever more aware of your inner idolatry and your need for change.

It takes a lifetime to learn how to identify and root out your heart idols. Your mistaken fixation on your perceived needs will continue to work against your sanctification. But in the end, Jesus will call you away from this life to himself, and you will forever worship the Lord exclusively. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!