

**Gideon –
“Confronting Our Idols”
Judges 6:25 – 32**

So once again we meet Gideon.

Last time we were here we talked about Gideon and how when read the story and look at his circumstances, his was a life marked by... fear.

So this morning's question:

“What is the most basic sin?”

Many people think that the most basic of all sins is unbelief or even doubt. But although mentioned in Scripture that barely rate behind the one is most basic of all.

The most basic sin is not unbelief.

The reality is, we can't help but believe in something or someone.

The most basic sin is found in our reading this morning.

What read about this morning is low ebb Israel has reached.

You see, what we find in this story is that the Israelites are caught up in idolatry but not only idolatry but they also practiced syncretism.

Syncretism is where differing beliefs are melded together.

It's clear that Gideon knew the story of the Lord's deliverance of Israel from the power of Egypt.¹

But here we find in his village and on his father's property was an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole, which is a wooden image of the goddess Asherah.

These were the gods of the Canaanites that the Israelites were explicitly warned about.

So the Israelite's thinking became something like this: yes Yahweh, the Lord, brought us up out of Egypt and is worthy of worship.

But now that we're in the land we need Baal the good of rainfall to show his favour on our crops.

And Asherah is the goddess of fertility and we need her blessing so our families and livestock can grow.

In Canaanite belief it was when meet together in sexual union that the land was made fruitful.

¹ See Judges 6:13.

And how would someone procure the blessing of Baal and Asherah?
what you would do is you would go up to the hills where the shrines were.
Then you would go to the altar of Baal and the Asherah pole (which were side by side) and indulge in “imitative magic”: they performed on earth what they wished the gods would perform in heaven.
These acts were meant to spur the gods into granting greater fertility.

But you see Yahweh, the Lord, will not tolerate rivals.
He is the Maker of heaven and earth; there is no other.
He will not let His people defile themselves and give their lives to gods who cannot save them.

This is reiterated and restated to Israelites time and time again.
In Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 15 –

“You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.

Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.

But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are.”

So Gideon is given a mission to destroy the town’s precious idols.
If the Lord is going to rescue Israel, the idols have to go.

Gideon does so under the cover of darkness because he fears what the townspeople will do to him – and for good reason.
When they discover the altar to Baal destroyed and the Asherah pole chopped into firewood in honour of Yahweh, they’re angry and they’re out for blood!
(As aside an aside, you know you’ve confronted an idol when see the depth of emotional response from people and wider culture).

The most basic sin, the one that reoccurs and is mentioned an astounding number of times in the Old Testament, is *idolatry*.

But this sin is not just limited to the Old Testament.

Where in the New Testament are these words mirrored?

In Romans chapter 1 we read these words:

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles.”

Romans 1:21 – 23

So prevalent is the issue of idolatry, that the passage in Deuteronomy comes with a strong warning.

What is the warning?

God’s people are warned: “*watch yourselves very carefully*, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol.”

Why watch ourselves not just carefully, but very carefully?

Simply because we as human beings are prone towards idol making.

We are worshipping creatures who must worship something.

Some 500 years ago John Calvin wrote that the human heart is an idol factory; like a factory it pumps out God substitutes at an astounding rate.

But how do we define what an idol is?

The passage in Romans helps us.

Romans 1 speaks of exchanging “the glory of the immortal God for images”.

This exchange is at the heart of idolatry. It’s taking the One who is eternal and uncreated and replacing Him with that which is finite and formed.

An idol is a substitute, a God-substitute.

We may be tempted to think this is limited to images made of wood, stone and metal, worshipped by some primitive, pre-modern tribe.

Yet the Western world is just as prone to idol worship as any other part of the planet.

As we read in Ezekiel, God says that people “set up idols in their hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3)

This substitution, this exchange then, means that something else is more central to your significance, purpose and happiness than your relationship with God.

Idols are things we truly live for, we obsess over or things that drive us. It's the making of created things in the ultimate things.

Furthermore, it is not evil things that capture our imaginations in the West but the making of good things into an ultimate things:

Work and career,
family and children,
a spouse or partner,
possessions and money,
pleasure and happiness,
friends and relationships,
noble causes and religion.

What's interesting is these warnings found in Scripture are addressed to God's people.

We may think, "How is that possible? I'm a Christian. I follow Jesus and I come to church every Sunday. I sing songs about God and read the Bible."

But think about it this way for a moment: it is possible to be at a movie and to have your mind wonder and be somewhere else. It is possible to have music playing in the background while at home or work. I don't know about you but there's been plenty of times when I been reading a book only to discover that I haven't taken in last paragraph because my mind has drifted onto other things.

In the same way it is possible to confess faith in Christ in your head while your life is pointed somewhere else, with something else is capturing your attention.

That something else is operating in the place of Jesus as your real, functional God and Saviour.

By saviour it's the belief in a very real sense that our idols will save us,
rescue us,
make our life meaningful,
significant,
worthwhile,
save us from the pain in our life.

They are things in which we've put our greatest trust, loyalty and hope.

My next question is this:

"How do we know if an idol is present in our life?"

I mean, for Gideon where was the idol?

It was on his door step, in the back yard, in his home.

It seems pretty crucial then that we identify potential idols in our lives.

But how?

In all of us there is the potential to believe that God-substitutes aren't a problem, to be blinded by self-deception.

A pastor was doing a seven-part series on the Seven deadly sin with a men's breakfast group. His wife told him, "I bet that the week you deal with greed you will have the lowest attendance."

Sure enough she was right. People packed it out for "Lust" and "Wrath" and even "Pride." But nobody thinks they are greedy.

As a pastor he had people come to me to confess they struggle with almost every kind of sin. But in his 30 plus years of ministry he could not recall anyone ever coming to him and saying, "I spend too much money on myself. I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family, my soul, and people around me." ²

Well, here's some pointers for us all.

Look for patterns in your life and ask, "Where do your thoughts drift to? Where does your money flow most freely and almost effortlessly? When and what powerful emotions emerge often in my life?"

When we daydream, when our minds drift, does it go in particular area *often*?

With money, we all know we have to pay the bills, the mortgage, the groceries. But outside of that, is our money heading specific area *a lot*?

Are powerful emotions like chronic fear or explosive anger a recurring part of our lives?

² Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods – When Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), 52.

If so, ask yourself whether there is something there that is so important, so necessary in your life that to be without it releases these emotions in you?

Here's another pointer.

An idol is anything that has so captured our allegiance –our loyalty, our trust, the centre of our lives – that we begin to compromise some of God's commands.

In other words, instead of Jesus calling the shots in our lives, something or someone else does.

In short, our integrity starts to be eroded.

Many years ago the drama of the Lance Armstrong saga unfolded on our television screens and in social media.

For many years the seven times Tour de France champion repeatedly denied taking performance enhancing drugs and other banned activities. His denials were continuous and forthright

Armstrong also went on the offensive accusing those who raised suspicions as being liars and jealous of his success, often taking and winning lucrative law suites. All the while he was seen as a role model and example by millions.

As we now know it was, in the Armstrong's own words, "one big lie", that his success was built on sustained and intentional cheating and deception.

While I obviously don't know for sure, I would suggest that there was a powerful God-substitute at work in Armstrong's life. Perhaps it was success, being the best, the ultimate cycling champion. Or maybe it was approval, the public adulation, of being adored by the crowds, onlookers and celebrities in his life.

Whatever the case, Armstrong's integrity lies in tatters.

Yet Lance Armstrong is one of us, a human being who is a very public example of what can happen when the wrong power calls the shots in our lives.

Finally, one of *the* powerful indicators is that when our idols fail us, we fall into despair.

After the global economic crisis began in 2008, there followed a tragic string of suicides of formerly rich and influential people. The acting chief

of Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, hanged himself in his basement. The chief executive of a leading real estate firm shot himself in the head behind the wheel of his red jaguar. When another executive learned that he would not be hired by the firm that bought his collapsed business he took an overdose and jumped from the 29th floor of this office building. When a French money manager lost 1.4 billion dollars of his client's money he slit his wrists and died in his Madison Avenue apartment. And the list could go on.³

When we lose what we consider our ultimate thing – the source of meaning and hope, what we've trusted in – there is nowhere else to turn to. We despair; we want to die.

So what's the way forward?

Even as I've been speaking this morning, you may have become acutely aware of an idol in your life.

We begin with that word that features a lot in Scripture – repentance. When repent we admit what we are doing is wrong, that our hearts and lives are wrongly ordered away from God.

We do so not in general terms but with specifics – whether it be money or family or career or whatever.

We 'fess up – we confess our wrong.

Yet it's not good enough to simply displace the idols from our hearts.

As we saw earlier, we can't help but worship, trust and put our hope in something or someone.

And yet removing an idol isn't enough.

It has to be replaced.

We see this with Gideon.

The false and ugly has to be replaced with the True and beautiful.

Confession has two sides to it.

One we've already talked about – admitting our fault.

³ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods – When Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), ix – xi.

The other side is confessing and rejoicing in that God in Jesus has poured out His love and grace on us.

It's declaring that Jesus alone is the true source of the love, acceptance and security we need.

In the reflecting on Scripture and in private prayer we seek to hear from God.

In corporate worship and shared community life
we rejoice in who Jesus is and what He has done,
we hear the Word of God preached
and we encounter others who share what they too have received from God (and who may even challenge us).

It's in these actions we make room to discover and encounter Jesus.

And as we make room for Jesus there is no room for anything else.

The reality is, *all of us* will spend our whole lives battling against idols.

Just when we've think we've got to the root of things, reached a place of serving God alone, we discover other substitutes at work, grappling for our attention.

Yet we know God is a God of grace and mercy.