

Title: “The Best of Both Worlds?”
Idolatry, Part 2
Text: Judges (selected)
7.8.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“How often do you read Old Testament (OT) books like Judges? Do you find them difficult to read? Why do you think we should read them? Why not?”

“Does idolatry seem like an antiquated notion to you? Do you see any parallels between the idolatry mentioned in the OT and the idols we construct in the 21st century? Are there some things that you believe all idols have in common?”

“If our idols are essentially the ‘work of our own hands’, what kind of gods are we making? What happens if you finally get everything your heart desires and you’re still not satisfied?”

“What are you trusting? What are you worried about? Might the two be somehow connected?”

“What’s in your hand? What are you holding onto? What is the lie, here?”

Consider Jesus’ remarks in Mark 4.

“... all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things...” (19)

“worries of life”

“How does your level of stress and anxiety demonstrate either a trust in God (his ways, values) or commitment to ‘living the dream’? In what pursuit in your life is God ‘absent’? How might that be causing you undue worry?”

“the lure of wealth”

“Why do you do what you do for a living? Do you desire a financial future which will allow you to hoard resources or which will permit you to fund generosity and blessing to others? Do you have enough? How do you know?”

“desire for other things”

“How would you finish this sentence from Psalm 42:1: As the deer pants for water, so my soul longs after _____”? What answer is your calendar, your budget, your relationships, your values, your vision for life providing?”

Teaching Notes...

“Why books such as these? Why spend any significant time attempting to navigate such antiquated and disturbing stories? Who needs to know that Ehud was left-handed or that the King of Moab was so obese that the sword used to kill him disappeared into his stomach?”

I guess, for my own sake, I’m interested, not so much in the details themselves, but in helping to develop a deeper connection to the story itself, and my place in it.

I enjoy these OT books because they contain the narratives/records of a people attempting to live uniquely in a pluralistic culture. I’m rarely surprised at human dysfunctionality because we are, after all, a mass of contradictions: capable of such kindness and much that contributes to the beauty, and capable of unspeakable evil. I am, however, struck by the overwhelming nature of disorder which we have come to accept as ‘normative’. We just feel so ‘at home’ in it.

I consider them because it forces me to confront the God-issues I would rather avoid. I intentionally address them because it underscores the **margins of revelation**. Everything that God says and does (ways he reveals himself) ultimately becomes subject to our own experience and context and God inevitably suffers for it. The “infinite” to the “finite”.

If you are familiar at all with the storyline, Israel has ended their (40)-year long camping trip (it took 40 years to get over a mountain pass) and have moved into a more promising land, but they realize that the promise of freedom does not always immediately resolve all of our issues.

Truly free choices are always conflicting. If we are to be truly free, we must have options. If we are to experience freedom, we have no other choice but God.

If the Israelites were to know the freedom of Canaan, Egypt would always present itself as an option. We experience this distorted sense of nostalgia which offers some warped sense of comfort.

Grace will always encourage and empower our freedom to choose rightly. It will even provide compassion and mercy when such freedoms are abused; but, it will never determine the choice for us. Choose wisely. Live freely.

1 John 5:21 *“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” (...keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts.” NLT)*

Idolatry is to displace the love of God as central to our significance and security.

Idolatry is not simply the domain of the primitive or under-developed peoples. It is the tendency resident within us all to seek fulfillment in something other than God. It is life’s most basic question: ***“Has something other than God captured your heart and earned your trust?”***

Idolatry is not offered as one sin amongst many, but as “the” sin which gives rise to all of our creative sin-expressions.

The Canaanites did not believe in “one, true God”. They had a number of ‘local’ gods, each with some specific aspect of life for which they were responsible. A “*Baal*” was primarily a god of fertility. In an agrarian society, healthy crops are not a luxury. You need a god who might be able to provide some assistance, in this venture.

It wasn’t as if the Israelites totally renounced or abandoned their God, they were simply attempting to ‘supplement’ him or form some type of contingency plan. *It couldn’t hurt, right?*

While the Scriptures certainly recognize the presence and power of spiritual forces behind the gods and idols, the OT much more frequently describes the idols as the ***“work of human hands”*** (Psalm 115:4-8; Hosea 8:4, 6; Jeremiah 2:11-13).

“What have you gained by worshiping all your man-made idols? How foolish to trust in something made by your own hands!” Habakkuk 2:18-19

We are often quite deceived about what really rules us.

Sometimes our efforts at competency are simply masking our need for validation. Sometimes our declared intent of *“looking our best”* is really our desire for someone to notice. Sometimes we eat too much and drink too much because we feel empty, and when we feel empty, **“more”** seems to be the most logical approach. Sometimes the quiet and confident one may, in fact, be wounded and resentful.

We must say, then, at least these things:

Idols are really nothing in terms of any divine claims that they make. There is only one who can rightfully claim that place, the Creator-God of the universe.

Idols are something in relation to the person who worships them. **gods** have real influence in the lives of those who treat them like gods.

It's not about the object itself, but the authority that we attribute to them and the leverage that we give it over our lives.

Our idols always "get the best of us": the best of our time, our energy, our finances, our resources, our attention.

Generally, our gods come from things we "treasure".

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:21

Our gods come from the things we fear.

We funnel millions of dollars into modern star-wars defense systems and "pupil identification", but we can't protect ourselves against a guy who drives a rented van into a crowd. We fear being alone, so we settle for whomever comes along to accompany us. We fear being hurt, so we pre-occupy ourselves and avoid deep-heart relationships.

Our gods come from the things that make us feel secure.

The paradox is that the things that make us feel secure have a tendency to enslave us and the things that really free us feel too risky.

Our idols come from the things that cause us shame.

Shame is the feeling of worthlessness that we develop in the belief that I am, at my core, 'unacceptable'. Our idols come from the persona we seek to purport as the result of a wound. *"You'll never amount to anything. You'll always be _____."* Link to that the desire to "prove my worth", and you have a recipe for any number of garden-variety idols.

Our idols come from our "ideals".

We never seem to be able to make the image fit with our reality. We are perpetually disappointed. It creates discontent and causes us to go from one job to another, one relationship to another, in continued search for the satisfactory.

"How will I know that I'm ready to displace all of these attachments so that I can allow myself to be loved well by God and love others more fully?"

I think it's when you are able to make the declaration found in Isaiah 44:20...
"What I have in my hand is a lie." This is the welcome of grace.

In most cases, it will be necessary for your idols to disappoint and fail you before you realize that they cannot satisfy you.

Most often, the longer our idols *seem* to provide the fulfillment that we are desiring, the *less likely* we are to consider abandoning them for something as risky as 'trusting God'.

Keep bringing who you are to God, not who you would like to be. We call it 'humility'.

The gospel says, "*How about you let God decide who you are and why you are? How about seeing your life as a grateful response to love rather than some strenuous effort at earning it?*"

Know that your deep-heart-passions will always trump your good intentions.

I'm amazed at the things that we are able to justify if our hearts really desire it. Once I set my heart on a certain course of action, I initiate a powerful process that will manipulate my logic and distort truth in order to ensure my satisfaction.

Surround yourself with people who can keep you pre-occupied with hope and not simply consumed with guilt and shame.

Know that if our idols are of our own making, they are not indestructible. Keep company with those who are "grace-full" and willing to be present with you in your struggle.

Determine to keep the vision of the "good" before you and do so with such regularity and passion that it begins to affirm your identity and re-direct your heart-pursuits.

Know that the conflict against the idols in our lives can only be won as they are constantly exposed for the deception that they really are, and we are able to exchange the lie for the truth of God's goodness.