



LIVING WITH IDOLS

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 1:1–2:5

1st Message

John Hanneman

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Today is graduation Sunday. This is a time to rejoice and celebrate and take note of what has been accomplished. But shortly, attention will turn to the next season—a new school, moving away from home, getting a job. And usually entering into the next season, entering into new territory so to speak, will have its challenges and surprises. New uncharted territory lies ahead. I recall that in between seventh and eighth grades my family moved from Des Moines, Iowa to Omaha, Nebraska. When I went to shop class on the first day of school, I was totally unprepared. Everyone else seemed to know the mechanics of drafting but this was new territory for me. It was a challenging moment for an eighth grader in a new school, not knowing a soul.

We commonly use the language of entering into a new season or taking on new territory to mean that we are doing something new that won't be easy, something that is unknown, uncertain, and might involve risk and create fear—like learning how to drive a car, climbing a mountain, getting married, or moving across the country. Every time we venture into new territory there can be mental, physical, or emotional obstacles we must overcome in order to succeed.

This idea of entering into new territory is pictured for us in the history of Israel. The people of God were slaves in Egypt, but God delivered them in a miraculous way. God also promised to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, a fruitful land. The land was a totally a gift, but they had to enter the land by faith and take the land, because there were enemies to be defeated. The Israelites could not be passive.

The idea of entering the land is a metaphor for spiritual life. The land is fulfilled in Christ. When we enter into life in Christ, we enter into a new territory, a new dimension of living. We are baptized into Christ. We die with Christ and we are raised with Christ. The crossings of the Red Sea and Jordan River represent this baptism. This new life is a free gift, complete grace, and yet we face challenges because there are serious enemies to contend with, namely areas of sin and idolatry. We are not to be passive and compromise. This is what the book of Judges is all about.

Today, we begin our summer study in Judges, entitled *Conquering the Idols of our Hearts*. Judges is beautiful narrative, but it is largely about Israel's failure. The material is not easy to digest and is often R-rated. Much of what we read in our newspapers would easily fit into the book of Judges. Israel was to possess the land of Canaan, a land filled with idolatry. But it was a time when "there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25 ESV). Doing right in our own eyes is usually wrong in God's eyes. Without God's eyesight correction, his laser surgery, we will be in trouble. Our vision will be distorted and we will be hindered from growing in Christ, possessing our life in Christ. But Judges also points us to a deliverer, a savior who can set things right and lead us into freedom and blessing when we are willing to confront the enemies in the land and rely on his strength.

Dealing With Enemies

God prepared Israel for entering the land of Canaan and this is what he told them:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you...and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire. (Deut 7:1–5 ESV)

So, complete destruction. No covenants, no mercy, no intermarriage. Obliterate the shrines and altars of the Canaanite gods. Now, this seems very harsh. How could a loving God command Israel to wipe out entire people groups? Does this apply today in the same way? Let me make two comments.

First, the Canaanites were under God's judgment, devoted to destruction, from the time Canaan, Noah's grandson, was cursed in Genesis 9. They were an immoral, wicked, evil people. God had waited until their time was fulfilled. But now the time of grace was over and Israel was God's rod of judgment. Just as resurrection broke into human history in Jesus, so here divine judgment broke into human history. We also need to remember that not all the Canaanites were judged, as was the case with Rahab, the harlot who helped Israel and was saved. In fact, some of the most faithful people in the book of Judges are non-Israelites who served God to a greater extent than the Israelites.

Because the land is fulfilled in Christ, we cannot use Israel's history to justify destruction of other people. We can't say that God is judging this nation or this people. The best thing we can do is to know that resurrection and judgment are real.

Second, God's concern for his people was that they would assimilate into the culture and serve the gods of the Canaanites. The land was where God would dwell with his people. God is holy and the land was holy space. Israel was required to cleanse the land so that his people could worship and serve Yahweh, "I AM," wholeheartedly. They were to have no other gods before them. The issue at stake was idolatry. God is a jealous God. He does not want to share space and time with false gods.

We don't face physical enemies, like Israel did, but as we enter life in Christ, we do face spiritual enemies. When we enter into life in Christ we are to cleanse our hearts from idols and sinful attachments.

Like Israel, we are to be ruthless, and completely eradicate the idols of our hearts.

Paul writes in Colossians: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5).

And Peter writes: “For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry” (1 Pet 4:3).

Life in our land, life in Christ, is holy space. God dwells with us. God desires us to worship him with all of our heart, not just some of our heart. We cannot serve both God and mammon. We cannot serve multiple masters. We live in a culture that tolerates religious pluralism, people picking and choosing a little of this and a little of that, doing what is right in their own eyes. But that is not the way of God. God will have nothing to do with that mentality.

The Enemies in Our Land

Let’s talk about idols for a bit. An idol is an image or other material object representing a deity to which religious worship is addressed. The idols of Canaan were Baal and Ashtoreth. There were multiple gods associated with these cults and there were physical representations of these gods. Most of us don’t have physical shrines and altars in our homes, although there are places in many parts of the world where idols are represented physically. I would guess that many homes in the Bay Area have some physical representation of a god.

The idols we are most familiar with are things, people, ideas, attitudes, and traditions. Idols arise from our inner desires, occupy our thinking, and motivate our actions. Devotion to idols creates addictions and compulsions. Idols are things that we love, things that compete for the affections of our heart.

We always think of the common addictions as idols—pornography, drugs, alcohol, compulsive buying, and gambling. Some of us might think that since we are not engaged in these activities we don’t have any idols, but we would be wrong. All of us have idols.

Our spouse or marriage, children, career, pleasure, comfort can all become idols. We love people or things more than we do God and worship them. I have a need for security and that can be more important to me than loving God and thus lead to idolatry. In recent years due to some physical issues I have seen how health can become an idol. I love to work out and feel good.

For young people, grades can be an idol. There is nothing wrong with working hard in school and getting good grades. But it is easy to be so obsessed with perfection that it rules your life and your heart. I was a good student. I got straight A’s and a tuition scholarship to university. But often, after taking a test, I would realize I had made a mistake and it would ruin me for an entire day. It is easy for the love of learning to be replaced with the idol of grades.

Probably one of the most common idols in our culture is money and possessions. The Canaanite god Baal was the storm god responsible for fertility. Worship of the Baals was thought to lead to prosperity—family, flocks, crops. In many ways this corresponds to the modern day prosperity gospel. We hope worshipping God will lead to material blessing, but we love the hoped-for blessing more than God. We serve money. But the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

Maybe the most pervasive idol in our culture today is the god of self. Our culture worships individual expression and self-actualization. Our narcissistic society encourages pursuit of personal happiness and gratification; the individual is supreme, not community. People carry on a loud cell phone conversation without caring how many people are in the room. It is all about “me.” As Ian Proven puts it, “The narcissistic society, the society that worships the self, is not the ‘good’ or the ‘great society, but a deeply dysfunctional and wicked one.”¹

Even religion and religious activity can become an idol. We worship the outer form without giving our hearts to God. We attend church and bible studies. We read our Bible. All of these things are good things. But we can go through the motions and think that it pleases God. The idol of religious activity can replace the purity of heart that loves God.

Imagine if someone could see our hearts or read our inner thoughts. We typically get really good at hiding these things from others, and even ourselves. For the past several years I have had severe back pain. But I have been on a medication for another issue that totally masks my back pain. And we can mask, through various means, the idols of our hearts, and not confront them. But the book of Judges forces us to do so, because it talks about idols in such a graphic way that we cannot avoid confrontation.

Why do we give ourselves to idols? The idol promises us something connected to life, happiness, and blessing. However, the worship of idols is a one-way street, because the idol can never offer anything in return.

The old gods are still with us. They have simply changed their clothes so that they merge more easily into the modern crowd. They still claim to provide meaning to life, to explain the universe, and to provide the basis for personal security. They still demand wholehearted commitment from their worshippers. Christians ought to be free of them; for a truly Christian view of the world provides the basis for such freedom.²

The book of Judges can bring us under conviction and that is a good thing. This summer I would like you to consider the idols in your hearts. What idols or areas of sin are living in your land that God might be asking you to confront?

Drive Out or Live With

The book of Judges opens with each of the twelve tribes going to their inheritance, after Joshua led an initial conquest of thirty-one kings in seven years. Each tribe was to finish the job started by Joshua by completely eradicating the Canaanites and other nations that lived in their allotted area. How did Israel do? Not very well. We don’t have time to read the whole chapter or mine all the details, but I will hit the main point.

After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?” The LORD said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.” (Judges 1:1–2)

Judah took a primary role in continuing the conquest. He had some success, but also some failures. He asked Simeon to go with him, when he should have relied on God. Simeon was a very small tribe anyway. They defeated the king Adoni-Bezek. But they cut off his toes and thumbs, a Canaanite practice.

The turning point was verse 19: “And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron” (Judges 1:19). Judah could do the easier tasks, but he didn’t want to take on an overwhelming enemy. He didn’t want to rely on God that much.

Then we get a summary of the rest of the tribes:

But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day. (v 1:21)

It took David to clean up Jerusalem.

The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the LORD was with them...And they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. (v 1:22)

Joseph showed this man and his family grace. But even though they took Bethel, this man went off and started another city. This illustrates that if we don’t completely deal with the roots of sin in our life and kill it completely, it will just show up somewhere else.

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants...When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely. (v 1:27)

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labor.

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon or of Ahlab or of Achzib or of Helbah or of Aphik or of Rehob, so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out. (vv 29–32)

Here is a subtle change. In the previous verses the Canaanites lived with the Israelites. But now we see that the Asherites lived among the Canaanites. Things are getting worse.

Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants...so they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labor for them.

The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. (vv 33–34)

I think you get the point. The tribes of Israel chose to live with the enemy instead of driving them out. The word “drive out” in the text means to dispossess. And the word for possess and dispossess is the same Hebrew word. In other words, in order to possess the land the Israelites had to dispossess the Canaanites. And if we are going to possess our life in Christ and live fruitful lives, then we must dispossess the idols of our heart.

Think about what you would allow to live in your house? Would you be content having a swarm of bees in your house? I really doubt it. If you had an infestation of bees living in your house you would call an exterminator and dispossess the bees. If there was a mountain lion in your back yard you would have to dispossess the lion in order to enjoy your back yard. You have to dispossess to possess. And that is what God calls us to do in our spiritual life. God deserves and

demands complete allegiance. Idolatry is allowing false gods to live in our heart.

When I was a teenager I was walking down the street and lo and behold I saw a questionable magazine laying by the side of the road. I took it home. I allowed it to live with me. But I had a God-conscience and knew it was not a good influence. So one night I took the magazine, walked to the end of the street, and threw it in a dumpster. Even then, I knew I had to drive out an enemy or idol to possess life. That is what God wants us to do with the idols of our hearts.

Selective Obedience

What does God think about allowing idols to live in our life?

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?” (vv 2:1–2)

Israel compromised in their obedience to God’s word. They thought it was no big deal to allow the Canaanites to live in the land. They thought they could co-exist, put the Canaanites to forced labor, keep them under control, and that they would not present any problems. And we do the same thing. Our obedience is selective. We pick and choose what we obey and do not obey.

When I worked for a government contractor, we had a saying, “It is good enough for government work.” And that is what we often say—it is good enough. I mostly obey the Lord. A little idolatry is ok. I have it under control. I’m better than anyone I know.

Why can’t we live with just a little idolatry? Why can’t we do what everyone else is doing? Living with idols will destroy your heart and make you miserable. Idols are snares or traps that lead to enslavement. And we will talk about that next week and answer this question more fully.

Life in Christ

Let me leave you with three thoughts. First, life in Christ is not about sin management. I want to say a word directed primarily to younger people who may have grown up in the church. Without even realizing it, you have come to think that church is about rules and a bunch of do’s and don’ts. You learn that Christians should do these things and not do others things. But Christ never penetrates the heart. Adults can also have this mentality. And this is why when young people leave home, they stop going to church and having Christian community. What I am talking about is not sin management but life. It is about your heart. Every person you meet is facing a great battle. And it is a battle for your soul. Taking the land is not easy. But it is a battle in which we are called to engage.

Second, we live with the tension of a loving and gracious God, but also God’s desire for us to obey him. God wants lordship over every area of our life. Often we say, “I can’t drive out this idol” or “I can’t change.” But what we really are saying is “I won’t.” Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area in my life? Am I willing to address my compulsion? Am I willing to forgive this person? If we are willing, God is able.

Third, we see in the book of Judges that we need to rely on the Lord and his faithfulness. The question throughout the book is whether God will give up. The good news in the book of Judges is that God does not abandon his people. God sends a savior or deliverer in the form a judge. There are six major and six minor judges. Even though there is a dramatic deterioration of character in these judges as the book progresses, they point to another savior, whose name is Jesus. Israel fails, but God is the hero of the story. God can deliver us as well. Jesus is our Savior.

Our hearts are prone to wander, and spiritual ups and downs are probably inevitable. We need constant renewal. We can't rely on ourselves; we will fail in our own strength. Self-effort and self-reliance is also an idol. But God is adequate and willing. We need to look to the cross. The cross is proof that God succeeds, even when we fail. We must continually turn to our Savior. We pray, like David in Psalm 51, that God might purify our hearts and not take his Spirit from us. This is why we gather as the body of Christ. This is why we take the bread and the cup. We remember the death of Jesus and the death of our sin. We remember the resurrection and that we have been raised with Christ.

Our adventure this summer is conquering the idols of our hearts. We come to God with honesty and openness. We confess and receive grace. And hopefully we will do that as a church body. Let me close by repeating part of our call to worship:

*For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.” (Ps. 96:1–6)*

1. K. Lawson Younger Jr, *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 97.
2. Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 98.

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