



SIN'S DEADLY CIRCLE

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 2:6–3:6

2nd Message

John Hanneman

June 19, 2016

Most of us have patterns and routines. We have daily and yearly routines, patterns to our mornings and evenings. I want coffee first thing in the morning and ice cream in the evening. And we have patterns and ways of responding to situations and people. We have physical or emotional places where we go when we are sad or angry or fearful. At some age, these patterns become hard-wired and repetitious. Eventually we become unaware of them and hardly recognize what we are doing.

Many of our patterns are actually connected to our relationship with God. At the root of all our actions is movement towards God or away from God, towards obedience or disobedience, towards trust or distrust, with Jesus or not with Jesus. When we move away from God, we move towards idols and sin, and vice versa. We develop deeply engrained repetitious patterns involving attitudes, actions, and thoughts. These can have disastrous results, as most of us have experienced. We feel guilty; we try and get back into God's good graces so we can feel better about ourselves. This can become a vicious circle, and this is what we see repeated throughout the book of Judges. The idols of our heart keep us going in circles.

The book of Judges is about each tribe going to their allotted possessions and completing what Joshua began in taking the land from the Canaanites and other nations. In order to possess the land as holy space, Israel had to dispossess these enemies and their idols so they could worship God and God alone.

Judges provides us with a picture of spiritual life, as we talked about last week. The land is fulfilled in Christ, and since we are in Christ, we are in the land. The enemies in our land are idolatry and sin. Idols come in various forms, even good things can become idols. We all have idols that compete for our devotion to God. In order to possess Christ fully, we have to dispossess the idols of our heart.

In Judges we see the failure of Israel to obey God. There was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. All week long we have been hearing and reading about the shooting in Orlando. This event could be in Judges. Judges is messy material that makes us cry one minute and laugh the next. And what the world needs, and what we need, is what Israel needed: Christ and the gospel of his grace.

Structure of Judges

Judges consists of two introductions, two conclusions, and the cycle of judges that includes the accounts of six major and six minor judges. The first introduction is the political point of view from on the ground. We looked at that last week. The second introduction is the theological, heavenly point of view. This is our text for today.

Another Generation

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of

the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years... And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. (Judges 2:6–10 ESV)

Joshua and his generation served the Lord and had seen all the great works of God—the miracles in the wilderness, the parting of the Jordan river, the walls falling down in Jericho, and many more acts of God. Joshua is described as a “servant of the Lord” which is a very lofty honor, a phrase also used to describe Moses. But then the next generation did not know the Lord or the works God had done. What happened? Who was to blame, the fathers or the children? Probably both generations were at fault. The fathers failed to pass on the stories and memories. The children did not pay attention and make faith their own.

Passing on faith to the next generation is serious business. Jesus paid attention to children, and we have to as well. The responsibility falls on the entire church community, not just youth workers. This may be the most important thing we can do.

We have elementary children in the service today, and it is great that you are here. You are a vital part of our church and have an identity separate from your parents. I want to say something to you. The goal of church is hearing about God and knowing God—his character, what he loves, how much he loves you. You do not have to feel pressure to be good or act right. Right now you have a great openness to God—children just get it. Eventually you have to make faith in Jesus your own faith. No one can do it for you. But just being in church helps that to happen.

I grew up going to church every Sunday. I didn't hear everything that was said, but I prayed the prayers, recited the creeds, and sang the songs. In the process of just being in church, God became part of me. This morning we sang, “This Is My Father's World.” I can't tell you how many times I sang that song growing up. As a result, it has a tender place in my heart. Just being in church implants the things of God in our minds and hearts.

Now let me say a word to you parents. Teaching your children about God is not easy. We want to depend on the church to do it. Dads want to depend on their wives doing it. Trying to push your children to accept Jesus can create anxiety and send the wrong message. Teach your children what is appropriate for the age. Start by simply reading gospel stories or the miracles God performed in the Old Testament. It is kind of like exercise—consistency is more important than the length of time. Remember there are no guarantees; you can do everything right and your children might still rebel against God. You can't determine the outcome.

The Cycle of Sin and Idolatry

What was the result of another generation not knowing the Lord? Here now we get the cycle of sin and idolatry that becomes the pattern for all the judge narratives. The first stage of the cycle is going after idols.

Bowing Down to Idols

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath. (Judges 2:11–13)

Evil in the eyes of Lord is defined by serving idols, abandoning God, and bowing down to other gods. Last week I talked at length about our idols, and illustrated what our hearts might look like to God when we bow down to serve false gods.

In verse 17, turning away from God and bowing down to idols is described as prostitution. I don't want to be too graphic here, but the word implies repeated actions of intimacy with different partners for personal gain. In other words playing with idols is not like a casual fling. The reality is an ugly picture.

And yet we all do it. We are prone to wander. We forget God. We look to idols of our world and culture that promise life, wellbeing, happiness, and security. These are all deep desires. But we think false gods can deliver these desires, and so we do what is right in our own eyes. But idols can never deliver what we truly desire.

God Is Angry

The second stage is God's anger. This idea occurs several times in our text.

So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. (Judges 2:14)

God is a jealous God and he demands exclusive allegiance, similar to what we desire in marriage. Our relationship with God is an exclusive relationship. God wants to be lord of every area of our life not just part. But God's anger is different than our anger. It is not opposite of love, but rather proof of it, an expression of it and is aimed at bringing repentance.

When we get upset with our children we sometimes get more emotional than maybe we should. But our anger is actually an expression of our love. If we didn't love them, we would not care what they did. But we have emotions attached to what they do because we love them and want the best for them.

When I was in high school I wrecked my dad's car. I remember coming home that night very distraught. My dad was watching television and never said a word. I wanted him to say something, even to get angry and yell at me. That would have shown that he loved me and cared for me. Silence sends a message. But God is not silent. God loves his people and so he is moved to anger. His anger actually shows he cares.

Oppression by Enemies

The third stage is oppression by enemies.

...he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm,

as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress. (Judges 2:14–15)

God sells his people into the hands of their enemies. The Israelites become enslaved, under the control of the enemy. They lost their freedom. God had warned the Israelites in Deuteronomy as to what would happen if they served the Canaanite idols, but they failed to heed the warning. God actually became their adversary. As a result, the Israelites became miserable. They were in terrible distress, between a rock and hard place, in dire straits. Their lives became more constricted and confined. And this is what idolatry does.

The result of serving idols is slavery and misery. We become a slave to what we serve. This is easy to see in the case of addictions. A person loses control. Life becomes unmanageable. We think video games are harmless, but they can enslave us. I can become a slave to a jigsaw puzzle. I can get obsessed and stay up all night finishing the puzzle. Lots of things can become enslaving. We can become slaves to religious legalism or the pursuit of wealth. The Lord himself is behind the slavery because he wants to show us that the wages of sin is death and turn to him.

This is a really important truth, especially for young people. Young people always ask, "why can't I do what everyone is doing? Why should I listen to the ways of God and pay attention? What is the harm in a little sin or a few minor idols?" The answer is that it will lead to slavery. A little sin will lead to more sin. As James says, desire gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to death (James 1:15). Once you start down that track, the train can run out of control. Instead of gaining life, you experience death. Your world shrinks. You become miserable. The goal is not to keep a lot of rules, but to gain wisdom and live life well, as God designed. Idolatry keeps us from life.

You also might say that no one else seems to be miserable. They seem to be having fun and enjoying life. That might be true for people who do not believe in Jesus. But God will not let his children get away with it. He loves us too much. The whole goal of God's discipline is to bring us to repentance and a willingness to surrender and turn to him, away from our idols. He makes us so miserable that we will destroy the idols of our hearts. He wants us to have life, and real life comes from him.

This is what brought me to the Lord. I became absolutely miserable serving sin. Every night when I went to bed I prayed for God to change my life. I would believe in him if he took away my misery. That didn't work. Finally, one night I simply told God to come into my life. I accepted him on his terms, turned from my idols, and turned to God.

People Cry Out to the Lord

The fourth stage is crying out. When the people became enslaved and miserable, they cried out to the Lord. This is not in chapter 2, but we see this in many of the judge narratives. However, the cry is not a cry of repentance. It is a cry of distress, a cry for help. Please God help me.

Salvation Through Chosen Judge

Stage five is salvation.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them...Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the

Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. (Judges 2:16–18)

This is absolutely astounding, because the Israelites do not cry out in repentance. And yet God saves them based totally on grace and compassion. God is in the saving business. This is the word for Joshua and the word for Jesus. The judges are called saviors. God hears the groaning of his people and he is moved to pity. Literally, he changes his mind, meaning that he relents and alters his plan. The evil he plans can change when people cry out to him in repentance. The good he plans can change when people disobey. (Jeremiah 18:7–10) God is unpredictable. You can't put him in a box. The idea that God changes his mind is part of his unchanging character.

Left to ourselves we make a mess of things. We need God to clean up the mess. I heard a story about father and son, actually a true story. The little boy was toilet training. One day the little boy was successful in the more difficult of the two tasks and then yelled to his father to come and finish up. The father was very happy, but told his son that now he needed to learn the second part of the job. But the little boy said I don't want to get my hands messy. The dad said he didn't want to get messy either. So, after a minute the little boy said, I know, let's get mom to do it. We can't clean up our mess. We need God to do it. He is better than mom. He sends a savior who delivers us.

Peace

The sixth stage is peace. Once the judge defeated the oppressing enemy, the land would have rest for some number of years.

Judge Dies; Return to Idols

The final stage is that the judge dies and the cycle starts all over again.

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19)

The cycle would start all over. But the next time it would be worse. In other words, the cycle doesn't just repeat. It becomes a downward spiral. It is kind of like driving in soft, muddy ground. Each time you drive on the same track, the indentation goes deeper and deeper. And that is what sin does. The rut gets deeper and deeper. Eventually we get stuck. That is what happens with repeated idolatry. We get stuck in sin or locked into those patterns in our life.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying that "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Why do we expect that we might have a different outcome when we do the same thing over and over? We are stubborn. We want life on our terms. But God won't allow it, because he has something much better for us.

Again, a word to younger people. The habits you develop when you are young are so important. The soil of your hearts is so soft. The patterns in your life have not been set in concrete. Further down the line, your hearts can become hardened. If you listen to the Lord and heed the warnings, it will be a huge benefit in your life. The spiritual life is not just about church. It is about knowing God and the life he gives. I am not saying that if you have good habits you are never going to sin, because you will. And I am not saying that when we get older we can never change, because we can, by God's grace. I am just saying that repetitious idolatry and sin develop deep patterns in our flesh that become more and more difficult to alter.

I am reminded of Emerson's great wisdom: "Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny."

All About Grace

How can we break the cycles and patterns in our life? We need help to clean up the mess, to get out of the mud. The help is God's grace and the gospel of Jesus. God's grace always trumps our sin. If we depend on our own strength, we will fail. Self-reliance will not work. Self-discipline might work for a while, but it too will fail. Pride is also a false god. Jesus died our death on the cross. Through him we die to sin and rise to newness of life. We will fail, but failure can lead to learning to throw ourselves completely on God's grace. We need God's grace flowing into our lives constantly to battle the idols of our hearts. Salvation is God's great work through Christ and these are the stories we need to share with our children and each other.

Lifelong Battle

We can have complete victory over the idols of our heart. But some things might be lifelong battles, especially if the habit is deeply engrained. This was true for Israel and probably true for us.

(God) said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died..." (Judges 2:20–21)

God didn't drive out the enemies for Israel and he does not always drive out our enemies. But there are two purposes in this. First, the enemies are there for a test.

...in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not. (Judges 2:22)

They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. (Judges 3:4)

The word "test" is repeated three times in the text. What does a test do? It reveals information. A math test reveals whether you have studied and know the material. Hearing God's word will reveal whether we really want to follow God and keep his ways or compromise and coexist with the idols in our hearts. The results of the test informs God and us.

The second reason for not driving out all the enemies is to learn war.

Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. (Judges 3:1–2)

The word "war" is also repeated three times. Enemies teach us to fight against evil and idolatry. This is holy war. Remember that we are talking about spiritual enemies that seek to destroy our heart. Our weapons are the sword of God's word, prayer, the Spirit, and reliance on his grace. God wants us to engage in this spiritual battle to possess our life fully in Christ.

So then, here is the cycle we see repeated in the book of Judges, over and over. Does this cycle look familiar in your own life? You will see this chart most weeks during the summer series. The hope is

that this repetition will make you aware of patterns that are deeply engrained in your life, that you might call out for God's help. The hope is that we will engage in the battle and not live with the idols in our lives.

Repentance

Perhaps you are feeling a bit convicted this morning. I want to pause and give some space to come before God and perhaps lay your idols on the altar and ask God for his grace.

Julian of Norwich said: "Sin is behovely (useful or necessary), but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Sin is useful, because we can come to God with a repentant heart and God always responds. We can bring all the skeletons in our closet to him. We don't talk about repentance much. We would much rather have feel-good sermons and lots of laughter. We like to talk about Spirit. But maybe the path to Spirit is through repentance.

True repentance moves us past guilt into the arms of our Father, where we are cleansed and forgiven. To not think we are forgiven is a denial of God's promises, a sign of unbelief. Some of my holiest times with God are when I see the depth of my sin in all of its ugliness, and come to the Father with a repentant heart.

Let me close with a few lines of Psalm 51:

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

**Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.**

**Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Ps. 51:7–12)**

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us (to pick us up when we fail, to break the strangle hold of slavery, to love us beyond imagination) to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

2016 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino