

Breaking the Cycle of Disobedience

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Introduction.

- A. Anybody remember the massive outpouring of religious sentiment after the 9-11 bombings? It seemed like suddenly, God was on everybody's lips. People who hadn't prayed in decades rediscovered the need to get back in touch with their Creator. Even our Congresspeople got into the act by singing "God Bless America" on the Capitol steps. I can't help but wonder what God thought of it all. Of course, in the end, it amounted to exactly nothing. Once the fear went away, America went back to its usual immoral, corrupt self.
- B. Interestingly enough, we see almost exactly the same thing from the ancient Israelites. Look at the condemnation pronounced in Judges 2:13-16, 19. The Israelites behaved wickedly until God started punishing them for their wickedness; then, they repented and cried out for help. Once they got the help they wanted, they went back to being wicked again. This cycle continued throughout the entire 400-year judges period.
- C. If we're not careful, folks, this can be our problem too, and it can be our problem even if we still assemble faithfully every week. Remember: the children of Israel never stopped worshiping God. They were fine with some lip service tossed in His direction. They just wanted to worship Baal and the Ashteroth in addition, and engage in all of the corrupt practices of the Canaanites. In the same way, a lot of Christians want to give God lip service today, while worshiping the gods of the world and living the wicked life of the world, and only really pay attention to the things of the Lord when life is collapsing around them and they need help.
- D. We might be happy with that way of life, but God isn't, and it will cost us our souls if we continue in it. God doesn't just want our attention when things are bad, while we spend the rest of the time worshiping at the feet of materialism. God wants our hearts all the time, and He refuses to share them with anybody else or anything else. Let's look, then, at seven things we need to grasp to break the cycle of disobedience.

I. Two Truths About Life.

- A. One of the first things we need to understand as part of our effort to devote ourselves wholly to God is that **WE ARE NOT IN CONTROL**. This is what Jeremiah conveys in Jeremiah 10:23. Calvinists take this to mean that we don't have free will, but that's not the point of the verse. Instead, what Jeremiah is saying is that even though we have free will, all of us are at the mercy of forces far more powerful than we are.
- B. We like to believe that we are in control, that life on earth will go according to our plans if we just plan well enough. Of course, exactly the opposite is true. We can make the very best decisions possible and do everything we can to carry out those decisions, yet still get stomped on by something we can't influence. There is not one thing we have in this life that we can guarantee we will have for even another day. Tomorrow could be the day we lose our prosperity. Tomorrow could be the day we lose our families. Tomorrow could be the day we lose our health. Tomorrow could be the day we lose it all and die. Friends, there is nothing we can do to prevent any of that. We have this illusion that life on earth is secure and safe; in reality, our blessings are about as stable as a soap bubble on the wind. It'll pop; the only question is when.
- C. Along similar lines, we also must grasp that **BLESSINGS ARE FROM GOD**. As we've seen before, we live in the midst of an idolatrous generation, and its idol of choice is money and all the things that money can buy. They are REALLY committed to it, too. Folks, if the people around us devoted the same energy to serving God that they devote to serving money, they would have won the world for Jesus ten times over! The great irony of all of this, though, is that they worship the gift rather than the Giver. Look at Paul's description of God in Acts 14:16-17. The only reason why any of us have ever earned a dime is because God gave us the ability to earn it and allowed us to keep it once we had earned it. That's it. Satan twists our perspective until we see material possessions as alluring and seductive, until we devote all our time and energy and resources to looking for the happiness from them that they can never provide. In reality, though, that's not what those material possessions are. In reality, they're a witness to the goodness of God. They shouldn't point us away from God, but to Him instead, so that we can faithfully serve Him in gratitude for what He's given us.

II. Three Truths About Evil.

- A. Now that we've got life figured out, we can turn our attention to evil, and one of the first things we need to understand about it is that **EVIL IS DESTRUCTIVE**. Look at how Peter describes the purpose of Satan in 1 Peter 5:8. Everything that Satan puts in front of us, without exception, is something he hopes will ruin us, both physically and spiritually. That's true of the obvious, flashy sins like drug abuse, but it's every bit as true of materialism. In fact, friends, I would bet that the worship of Mammon does more people in than cocaine.
- B. It reminds me, in fact, of one of Lauren's co-workers at her job in Texas. It so happened that this co-worker, let's call her Gina, had a baby and went out on maternity leave. Six weeks later, Gina was back at the office, and glad to be back. Her husband was driving her crazy, her daughter was driving her crazy, and work was

both a sanctuary and a means of buying more of the cool stuff that she loved. What do you think's going to happen to that marriage in five years? What's going to happen to that baby over the next twenty years? How commonly is that pattern repeated over and over, every day, all across this country? How many workaholics end up with families who hate them? How many big spenders end up enslaved to their credit-card debt? How many lives ruined, how many dreams destroyed, because people love Mammon more than God? If we get caught up in the materialistic rat race, how, exactly, are we going to turn out any differently?

- C. This is all the more dangerous because **EVIL APPEARS BY DEGREES**. Satan's a subtle guy. He doesn't ruin us at once; instead, he sneaks up on us bit by bit. Look at the description of the sluggard in Proverbs 24:32-34. That's the way that physical poverty arrives: because the sluggard makes a series of tiny choices that end in disaster. Exactly the same thing happens with spiritual poverty. All of us only have a limited amount of resources, of energy and time that we can devote to serving something. Satan works by convincing us to shift those resources from serving God to serving materialism, and he works on one tiny particle at a time. He convinces us that we have to stay late one Wednesday night to work on a big project that has to get done, so we skip services. Then, Satan tries it again and again and again, until we stop showing up on Wednesday nights at all. Then, he gets to work on Sunday nights, or the time we spend with our families. By the time Satan's done, we've become all-stars at serving our employers, but worthless at serving God.
- D. The point of this is not that we should expect to go to hell if we miss a single service. Sometimes, our jobs make demands on us that we have to fulfill, just as I'm sure happened to Christians in the first century. The point is that we need to be aware of where Satan wants to take us with that, and make sure that our spiritual balance sheets don't reveal that money, not God, has now become our first priority.
- E. We also need to see that **EVIL WILL DESTROY MOST**. Look at Jesus' prophecy concerning the eternal destination of most people in Matthew 7:13. In our culture, so much of our materialism is driven by envy. We want to have a nice car because So-and-So has one. We want a house in that good neighborhood because Thus-and-Such has one. There are a number of problems with that attitude, but one of the biggest is that it doesn't consider the consequences. Before we get sucked into keeping up with the Joneses, we need to think about where the Joneses are headed. There are lots and lots of people in this country who are making money hand over fist to the destruction of their souls, and there are even more people who AREN'T making money hand over fist, but are so caught up in trying that they lose their souls too. We just can't afford to devote the resources to getting stuff that most around us do, because if we do, we'll be doomed just like they are. Our standard of comparison is not people around us. Our life's work is not trying to achieve excellence in the eyes of the world. Our standard must be the word. Our goal must be excellence in the sight of God.

III. Two Truths About God.

- A. With this in mind, friends, let's spend a moment looking at what excellence in the sight of God requires. In the first place, **SERVING GOD TAKES DEDICATION**. Before our leadership meeting the other day, some of us were joking around about the minimal level of achievement required to succeed in academia. We were saying things like, "C is for credit" and "C's get degrees." Folks, if we take that minimalist approach to serving God, the only thing we'll get out of it is a lot of disappointment and regret. Consider Jesus' comments on the subject in Matthew 22:35-37. Loving God with all we've got doesn't leave a lot left over. To be precise, if we love God with everything, there will be nothing left. We need to consider every aspect of our lives and ask ourselves what God wants us to do in it. There's nothing wrong with having a job; in fact, God expects us to have one to provide for ourselves and our families. There's nothing wrong with having money and nice things; in fact, God is glad when we have the chance to enjoy them, provided that we've come by them in a godly way. The problem arises when our wants become needs and that important part of our lives grows out of control and becomes the center of our lives. Our lives can have only one center, and that's God.
- B. Likewise, friends, we need to see that **ONLY TREASURES IN HEAVEN ENDURE**. In our various ways, this is something that each of us needs to come to grips with. For instance, I know quite well what my temptation with materialism is. Several years ago, when I was looking for a job and completely unable to find a job, I went broke and had to ask my parents for help. I HATED it. In fact, I hated it so much that that time changed forever the way I look at money. To me, money is security. I hate spending money, because every time I do, I give up a little piece of my security, a little bit of my protection against being desperate and helpless and needing to ask others for help. If Satan ever gets me through materialism, that's the way he's going to do it, by convincing me that if I have enough money, then I'll be safe, and then sitting back and watching as I discover that no matter how much money I have, it will never be enough.
- C. Folks, no matter what our money issue is, Mammon is always going to disappoint us. No matter how hard we chase possessions and wealth, they will never give us what we want them to give us. Only spiritual riches can do that. Look at what Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21. I can't amass enough treasure on earth to protect me, but I can store up enough treasure in heaven to keep my soul forever. Only by serving God can we possibly ever find what we want. Let's seek that treasure instead of the deceitful riches of the world.

Conclusion. If you've been giving your life to the wrong god, now is the time to obey the right One.