

Introduction

Many years ago I worked in the mortgage industry. In the first mortgage company I worked for we sold both prime and subprime mortgages. If your only aim was to make money, the subprime market was the focus. “Subprime” borrowers are those with poor credit, for whatever reason. There may have been an illness or major medical problem. There may have been an unexpected loss of work or income for any number of reasons. Sometimes people are “subprime” borrowers because they are truly bad with money, but most folk who are in this category of borrower have found themselves in a bad situation needing help.

This was at the height of the refi boom. Rates were dropping and people had lots of equity. By refinancing their homes at lower interest rates and using their equity, people could pay off lots of debt. It was a great way out for many. As I mentioned, it was also an effective way to make lots of money, for such folk often had little recourse than to pay ridiculous fees and ridiculous rates—both of which enriched the loan officer.

This company hired a group of loan officers who had worked for a shady subprime lender. One day they were talking about their days selling used cars. One young man bragged about how he had overcharged his grandmother by about \$8,000 and made a ton of money on that particular deal. I was shocked. I said, “You did that to your *grandmother*?!” His response shocked me even more: “If you can’t do it to *family*, who *can* you do it to?”

The brokenness of this view ought to be self-evident. Surely family should be the last folk we would cheat and steal from, right? As I think about our text I realize that doing the *right* thing with family is also difficult. I’m struck with the same question: if you can’t do the right thing with and for family, then who can you do it with? Following the Lord and doing the right thing is a difficult path and God calls us to be faithful in all areas of our lives. This means living a life with no regrets, but filled with repentance. We’re in Judges 6.

Jdgs 6:25 That night the LORD said to him, “Take your father’s bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it ²⁶ and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.” ²⁷ So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

²⁸ When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. ²⁹ And they said to one another, “Who has done this thing?” And after they had searched and inquired, they said, “Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.” ³⁰ Then the men of the town said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken

down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it.”³¹ But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.”³² Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, “Let Baal contend against him,” because he broke down his altar.

Judges 6:25–32

Israel Did Evil

The cycle of Israel doing evil in the sight of the Lord, God raising up an oppressor, Israel crying out, and God raising up a deliverer repeats. The first judge, Othniel, was straightforward. God called him, he raised an army, he defeated the greatest enemy Israel faced in the period of the judges. Israel does evil again, God raises up another oppressor, Israel cries out, and this time God raises up a deliverer whose story is told in a bit more detail: Ehud uses deception to get close to the king and kill him. The story of Deborah and Barak is also told in a bit more detail, but then we come to Gideon.

The cycle continues. Israel did what was evil. God raised up the Midianites. By doing so God was initiating Israel’s *repentance*. God was allowing them to suffer, that they might turn to him in genuine faith. The problem was not that Israel failed to worship the Lord; the problem was Israel failed to worship the Lord *alone*. The first commandment was simple and straightforward: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

That could be translated, “besides me” or “in addition to me”. One scholar renders it, “You shall have no other gods in my presence”—and he’s present *everywhere*. The point is a singular devotion to the Lord, the God of Israel, the one who initiated the rescue of Israel from Egypt in order to fulfill his promises. To be faithful to YHWH God of Israel was to worship no other gods.

Every other sin Israel could commit flowed out of a failure to keep this commandment. Any illicit desire or action only comes when someone or something is elevated to the level of God. In this way we bow before idols all the time. We indicate with our actions and with our desires that a thing is more desirable to us than fidelity to the Lord. This was Israel’s problem, too. Rather than love the Lord their God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength, they loved him partially. They served him, but also served other gods. They failed to realize that serving other gods was necessarily a refusal to serve him so while they *appeared* to serve him, they were not, in fact, serving him.

In the ancient world only the Lord insisted on single-minded devotion. All other gods were fine with a person worshiping other gods, so long as the person offered the right sacrifices to that particular god. Perform the rituals properly, then go and do whatever you want. The Lord is not like this. He knows the other gods are not real. He knows they demand more and more and lead only to death and destruction. It is loving for him to insist on singular worship, for only he offers life.

Because Israel continued to do evil by worshiping other gods, the Lord allowed other nations to oppress them. This was always an act of discipline. The Lord was seeking to rescue his people but in order to rescue them they had to know what they needed rescue *from*—and it wasn’t foreign oppressors. They needed rescue from their predilection to serve

other gods. To show them the evil of worshiping other gods, he allowed them to suffer at the hands of those who taught them to worship other gods.

When they cried out to the Lord, the Lord chose to send a different sort of rescuer. He sent them a *prophet*. When Israel cried out for rescue, God sent them a *sermon*. This might seem unloving. The presenting problem is they were being oppressed: foreign armies were stealing their crops, leaving them with little food. God's response to this? *A sermon*. Barry Webb explains the real problem God is addressing.

This state of things in Ophrah is symptomatic of Israel's situation in general; the real problem is not the relationship between Israel and Midian, but the relationship between Israel and Yahweh, which has been compromised by the worship of other gods. At heart Israel's problem is a spiritual one, and therefore the "saving" of Israel (v. 14) must begin with reclaiming her from apostasy.

Barry G. Webb, NICOT

God sent them a prophet who proclaimed a message to them because they were their own biggest problem and the message the prophet proclaimed identified this.

Regret vs. Repentance

Up to this point Israel has not repented, they have only regretted. Regret is what you feel when things don't turn out the way you'd hoped because of something you've done. Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and the consequences of this evil is the oppression by foreign enemies. Still, when they cried out to the Lord, he had mercy on them! He raised up deliverers for them! His grace is profound.

The pattern repeats numerous times. It is unlikely the book of Judges contains every single judge God raised up. Most of the oppression they experienced was regional and local. Occasionally, as with the Midianites, enemies would swoop through the land, bringing destruction and pain everywhere. Most of the oppressors affected a small part of Israel. God recognizes this pattern and seeks to break it. Remember, God initiates with Israel. He wants their repentance, not their regret. He wants their love and affection—the right response to his love and affection for them! Here's the problem with regret:

First, "worldly" sorrow or regret does not produce any real change, while repentance does. Why? Regret is sorrow over the consequences of sin, but not over the sin itself. If there had been no consequences, there would have been no sorrow. There is no sorrow over the sin for what it is in itself, for how it grieves God and violates our relationship with him. The focus is all horizontal—"worldly"—and not at all vertical—concerned about how it affects relationship with God. Therefore, as soon as the consequences go away, the behavior comes back. The heart has not become disgusted with the sin itself, so the sin remains rooted.

Tim Keller, "Judges For You"

He goes on to say worldly sorrow remains regretful, while repentance removes all regret. This is because true repentance results in true forgiveness. Israel is filled with regret on

account of the Midianites and their substantial suffering at their hands. God's aim in sending them a prophet is real, genuine repentance. They asked for a miracle and God sent them a sermon! The sermon is an amazing gift! The real problem Israel was facing was not the Midianites, but the evil in their hearts. God's kindness is seen in the prophet calling out their sin, that they might truly repent of their evil.

It isn't until they understand the real evil of their sin that the rescue will produce its intended effect: their transformation. God isn't interested in merely improving their situation; his interest is in improving *them*—making them into the men and women they should be. Israel cries out to God in regret rather than repentance. The apostle explained this difference.

^{2 Cor 7:10} For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Godly grief produces repentance, and the reason true repentance leads to salvation is it comes from faith, not regret for circumstances. Anyone can lament difficulty; only faith in the Lord produces genuine sorrow for sin.

Preserved

In this Gideon cycle the author slows down and gives a great amount of detail. We saw last week the Lord had to prepare Gideon. He was not ready for full obedience. He was not ready to lead an army into battle. God reassures him of his calling and reassures him he will be with Gideon. Only then can Gideon be given a specific task.

After the Lord appeared to him and turned his gift into a sacrificial offering, the Lord spoke to him again and gave him a specific task: he must take two of his father's bulls and pull down the altar of Baal. Further, he must chop down the Asherah next to the altar and use it for firewood for offering the second bull as a sacrifice.

These bulls are oxen—very large animals that are incredibly strong. Notice that it will take two of these oxen to pull down this altar. This altar isn't in his dad's back yard. In verse 26 God mentions taking the stones of the destroyed altar to build a new altar "on top of the stronghold here". This altar is a community worship center! It is massive!

It was built next to an Asherah pole. Asherah poles were made of living trees that were either pruned into a specific shape or carved into a specific shape. The altar of Baal was built next to it intentionally since the tree was already there.

Because we're twenty-first century people we miss so much of the visual communication in this destruction of the altar. Baal was the storm god. He was often depicted as a bull. So we have the altar of the divine bull being destroyed by a very ordinary pair of bulls. Further, the Lord specifically tells Gideon to take a bull, just a bull, and then to take a specific bull—the one that is seven years old. With these bulls he must pull down this massive altar at this community worship site. Why is the second bull specifically pointed out to be seven years old? How old is the first bull? Apparently that's not important! But the age of the second one is.

Remember that God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, plus 10,000 things in her life and his life and their life, and each one of us may only be aware of perhaps three of these 10,000 things. We don't know how old the first bull is but we know the second bull is seven years old. What happened seven years before this?

Jdges 6:1 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.

Judges 6:1

It's not hard to imagine seven years earlier that Gideon went to his father and told him, "Hey, the cow gave birth; she had a bull. Looks pretty strong, too." Then the Midianites came and started taking everything. The fact that this young bull was not taken was evidence of God's continuing care for his people. Yes, they took crops. Yes, they took sheep and cattle and donkeys. They did not, however, take absolutely everything for the people had enough—even if barely—to plant the following year. They had some sheep and cattle left—enough to give birth to some animals.

Just as God preserved this bull for seven years, so he had, in fact, preserved his people for those same seven years. Were things difficult? Sure. Absolutely. Things were difficult, yet by preserving this particular bull God was signifying that he had not forsaken his people. Surely Gideon caught this, too. Earlier that same day he had accused the Lord of forsaking his people for those seven years. In response the Lord gently reminds him that this bull had not been taken for those seven years.

Tearing Down Idols

In verse 27 Gideon obeys the Lord. His perspective has been changed. No longer does he think the Lord has forsaken his people. Whether he understands fully or not, he realizes Baal worship and Asherah worship were an indication of the depth of the problem.

He takes these two bulls and ten of his servants. *Ten of his servants*. Not all of them. Ten of them. Gideon may be least *in his father's house* but that appears to be more than most were. This raises the question: how big is this altar that it takes two bulls *and ten men* to destroy!?! Some of the need for so many would have been speed, but this is a large worship site.

The text says Gideon took them by night to do this because he feared both his own family and the men of the town. Remember, this is a *community* altar. It was owned Gideon's father Joash, but destroying this altar was destroying a community altar. Thus the Lord strikes right at the heart of Israel's idolatry. Gideon's own family has been contributing to the worship of other gods.

Despite his fear of the people, Gideon now fears the Lord more. Just as he continued threshing wheat, but in secret, so he obeys the Lord, but at night. *He's a work in progress*. In the morning as men were going to work, they noticed the altar had been destroyed and the Asherah had been chopped down and burnt. They also saw the seven-year-old bull had been sacrificed on a new altar to the Lord.

In verse 29 they ask, "Who has done this thing?" This was the right question! It was about the wrong thing, though. They should have been asking, "Who has built this altar

to Baal? Who has carved this Asherah pole?” They should have celebrated the hero who destroyed them, but instead they seek to destroy the “hero” himself.

It didn’t take them long to find out it was Gideon. The problem is Gideon’s father was powerful. Rather than rushing in to grab Gideon, they demand that Joash bring him out and allow them to kill him.

One thing I’ve learned in all my years of ministry is this: poking at someone’s idol is the quickest way to provoke them to wrath. People will immediately turn against you for exposing their idols. If you come to me and suggest I’m not very good at responding to texts, yeah. I know. I’m not all that organized, and I’m a bit lazy at times. I know. I don’t tend to find my identity in being that guy. Say something that provokes my pride, though? Oh, let’s go! Suggest that I don’t know what I’m talking about on all but a handful of topics? Oh, leave my idols *alone!*

Tearing down idols is a dangerous task, for it reveals where a person’s heart truly is. An idol is necessarily the thing one’s devotion is given to, and a person will defend that idol with every breath. This is why Jesus said you can’t serve two masters. It’s an impossibility. When Israel “also worshiped” YHWH, they weren’t really worshiping him. Their true devotion was to the idol. We see this in the men of the town wanting to kill Gideon for tearing down their idols. They almost certainly *also* worshiped YHWH—except YHWH said to worship him is to worship him *alone*, not *also*.

In response to their demand Joash seems to be realizing something. Who knows why he had this altar. It may be that he was trying to buy favor in their eyes. He’s certainly complicit: it’s his altar on his land and he shares it with the community. We don’t know how vigorously he himself worshiped Baal and Asherah. They may simply be a means to an end, but at the very least he’s *encouraging and enabling* their idolatry and now that it’s taken away, the people are ready to kill.

Joash asks if they will contend for Baal. Will *you* fight for *him*? Surely he sees the absurdity in what is happening. If Baal is a god, then let Baal defend himself. What sort of god needs a mere human to *defend* him? Then he issues his own warning: whomever will contend for Baal—by killing Gideon—will himself be dead by morning. He’s saying, “Lay a hand on my son and I will lay a hand on you.” Gideon may be least in his father’s house, but his father is greatest in it.

Joash seems to be recognizing that Baal is, in fact, impotent. Unable to act. The divine bull is destroyed by two very ordinary bulls, and a very ordinary man. The town gives Gideon a nickname: Jerubbaal—“let Baal fight him”. If he is a god, he can handle things for himself.

True Worship

It is very interesting that twice now God first sent them a prophet. We don’t have Deborah’s message but we have this particular unnamed prophet’s message: God is the one who rescued you from Israel, to bless you and call you his people; he demands that you worship only him, but you have not obeyed him. Notice that God didn’t point out Israel failed to keep “the rules”. He doesn’t rebuke them for mixing their fibers in their clothing or for violating the Sabbath. Surely they violated these commandments. Instead, God addressed their *worship*.

We frequently want to measure our “spiritual growth” in terms of “not sinning”, rather than in worship. It is so much easier to check a list and “know” that we’ve been good for today. Think of the rich young ruler who went to Jesus. He asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him in return what the Law says. His eyes no doubt lit up at this. Jesus mentioned a few: do no murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; love your neighbor as yourself.

His eyes no doubt lit up because he could claim he had kept those. He had not, in fact, killed someone. He did not sleep with his neighbor’s wife. He hadn’t stolen anything; why would he? He’s rich. He hadn’t lied or dishonored his parents. He could say he loved his neighbors because he was kind to them. Or at least he wasn’t *unkind* to them. Then we read this.

Mk 10:20 And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”
21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Mark 10:20–22

That verse, verse 21, gets me. Jesus looked at him and *loved him*. Then he does for the rich young man what he did for Israel when he sent them a prophet: he confronted him for bowing down to an idol. This man’s idol was not a carved image. He would never have an altar to Baal. He would never carve an Asherah pole. But he loved money. He was “disheartened” by Jesus’ words. He was grieved, *pained* by them, for they cut his idol.

We do the same thing. We resort to a list of rules that we keep. That list is different for each one of us. It might include positive things: I read my Bible and prayed before meals. I forced “Jesus” into a conversation with a guy at the grocery store. I gave an offering at church. It might be negative things: I didn’t sleep with my neighbor’s wife. I didn’t look at porn. Well, *today*. I didn’t steal. I didn’t kill. Well, that excellent retort on social media might be a felony in a few states, nahmean?

It’s easier to live by a list. We can check a list. We can control the list. When God sent a prophet to Israel he directly confronted their *worship*. I don’t mean he confronted the various rituals they had to perform. He confronted their hearts, challenging them on what they desired most. Is it Baal? Or is it YHWH God of Israel? Only one of these rescued them from Egypt and parted the Red Sea. Only one of these sent them manna from heaven and gave them water from a rock. Only one of these caused the walls of Jericho to fall and defeated the major coalition forces throughout the land of Canaan. Israel’s real problem is the one who did these things isn’t the one they were choosing to worship.

Application

Repentance and worship go hand in hand. Repentance is always a move from sin back to real, genuine worship of the Lord. That doesn’t mean doing the right things or performing the right rituals. It means loving the Lord your God above all else. It means granting him glory and honor—and only him.

Repentance without worship isn't repentance; it's a form of regret. You're merely trying to avoid something. You're trying to escape from whatever negative consequences your sin brings—even if that is only an overwhelming sense of guilt. So you go through the motions of repentance. You say you're sorry to God and promise you'll try harder next time. But your heart isn't changed. Tim Keller nailed this problem:

We need to discern in ourselves the difference between the normal lapses on the road to increasing Christian maturity and getting “stuck”—a repeated pattern of lapses which is a sign of no real progress. If you are continually falling into the same spiritual pit, and your falls are not decreasing in numbers or intensity, then you may be responding in regret rather than repentance. In other words, you may be simply regretful for the troubles of your sin, but unwilling to identify and reject the idol under the sin which is still attractive to you.

Tim Keller, “Judges For You”

Real repentance is a realignment with God and his character. It requires seeing sin from God's perspective and recoiling in horror from it. Too often we recoil from the *consequences* of our sin rather than from our sin. Real repentance calls sin what it is. It is *evil*.

Israel's evil was bowing down to idols. Our sin—our *evil*—is the same. We bow down to idols like popularity and people-pleasing, money and power and pleasure, social media likes and nice, shiny things. We bow down to mere amusements that keep us distracted for hours and we bow down to convenience. We bow down to worry and fear and anxiety over the future.

God initiates the relationship with Israel. Remember the words of the prophet from last week. God rescued them from Egypt. God brought them out of the house of slavery. God rescued them from the hand of all who oppressed them. And then God said to not fear the gods of the Amorites, for they are no gods at all. They must not bow down to them. When they did, God once again initiated their *repentance*. He allowed them to suffer, that they might see the terrible nature of their sin and repent—genuinely repent.

God is initiating the same with us. He has rescued us from the house of slavery—from sin and death. He has defeated that great enemy Satan when he walked out of his tomb on the third day. We face the same task Israel faced: we must clear out the land God has given us. What remains is the Canaanite *inside us*. We must root out idolatry from the land, which is to say, we must repent and move forward with Christ. I shared this quote a few weeks ago:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Martin Luther, Thesis 1, “Ninety-Five Theses”

Our text is calling us to repentance. It is calling us to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. We don't root out idolatry by hunting for it, but by confessing it when we see it in ourselves. As we do this we rest in the gospel truth that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us. We don't linger in it. We confess it and we move forward in Christ.

The book of Judges isn't depressing. It is filled with hope. Throughout the book the people of Israel were being shown shadows of the King who would come and rescue them,

the one who would defeat sin and death. They were being shown they needed someone outside of themselves to be faithful for them and to take away their sin, that they might be transformed. Israel needed to worship, so the one worthy of worship would one day come to them, that they might see him and touch him and know him. One day this King is coming back. And when he does, we will worship him.

As did ancient Israel, we await a Savior. This is what the season of Advent is about. We await the one who will complete the work he started. Unlike Israel, we know Christ has come. He has done everything necessary for our life and salvation. We long for his return, for when he does, he will complete the work he started. Until he does, let's live lives of repentance, not lives of regret—lives filled with worship of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.