

“Idols of the City”

Text: Jonah 2:8-9

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 5, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Mike Tyson is one of the greatest heavyweight boxers in history. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** In the 1980s and 1990s he knocked out one opponent after another. He made over \$300 million dollars but then declared bankruptcy.
 - I watched a documentary where he said he spent it on wine, women, and parties. This all led him into significant substance abuse.
- While none of this surprised me, I was astonished to hear Tyson’s self-reflection on what motivated him to grab onto to all these things that ultimately destroyed him. Tyson said,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** *“I became an addict out of depression. . . . It left a great sting in my heart and a big emptiness. I had all these things in life but none of them filled that big hole that I had in my life. Nothing fulfilled that. If I could have all that and it hasn’t filled that hole that I have, it is not going to do it. So it has to be something that I am looking for.”*¹
- Tyson is simply echoing the experience of all thoughtful people. As human beings we have an instinctive need to grab hold of something that will satisfy the deep needs of our hearts. We try to find it in relationships, in work, in family, or in sports. But Tyson is also echoing what we all say if we live long enough, namely that nothing in this world can ultimately satisfy us.
 - Tyson had what most people want – career success, money, respect, all his bills taken care of, romance, holidays, and pleasure. And yet he confesses that all these things he clung to for meaning only broke apart in his hands.
- The Bible says that the reason that nothing in this world can fill that hole in our hearts is because God alone can fill it. But as human beings we have all turned away from God and grabbed onto other things – believing that if we gave ourselves to music, relationships, sex, money, academic achievement, work, or family that these would be able to fill the hole in our souls.
 - The Bible’s word for this is “idolatry.” Idolatry is clinging to anything else but God for your heart’s satisfaction.
- You see it this story of Jonah. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh but Jonah turned away from God and ran the opposite way toward a city called Tarshish. He believed that Tarshish would provide him with the life he wanted.
 - But as we will see, Jonah learned through painful experience that idols will always fail but God will always satisfy.
 - So as we begin this new year I want to focus our hearts and lives on the very core of our lives. To do this I want to look at just two verses in Jonah’s prayer. Here is the main thing I want to show you today: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** **Since God alone can give us all we need, we must turn from idols to Him.** Let’s develop this in three points.

BEWARE OF YOUR TENDENCY TO GRAB ON TO IDOLS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** **First, since God alone can give all that we need, we must beware of our tendency to grab on to idols.**
 - So far in the story, God has called Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh to warn them of judgement. But he runs away from God goes in the opposite direction to the city of Tarshish. God sends a storm, Jonah is thrown overboard, and God sends a fish to swallow him. Jonah has now

¹ James Toback, *Tyson*, 2008.

spent some time reflecting on the folly of running away from God. His near-death experience in almost drowning and God's rescue of him through the fish has brought him back to his senses.

- As he reflects, Jonah summarizes his experience in verse 8. **READ 8 – Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.**

- Whom is Jonah referring to? Who paying attention to worthless idols? It could be the sailors in the story 1:5 says they **“each cried out to his god.”** It could also be the Ninevites because they worshipped all kinds of idols.
 - But Jonah may also be thinking of himself. Oh yes, he was not worshipping a pagan idol as the sailors did. But he certainly worshipped gods of his own making. This is clear because he ran away from the true God to Tarshish. He believed that life in Tarshish could provide him with the meaning and happiness that God could not.
 - He had also made a complete idol out of national Israel. Even though God wanted to extend grace to Israel's enemies in Nineveh, Jonah was willing to reject the true God for sake of his nation.
 - In other words, this whole story is about idolatry. Idolatry in the sailors, in Nineveh, and in Jonah. More accurately though, it is God showing the sailors, Nineveh, and Jonah that the idols always fail us but He can give us all we need.
- The story is thick with irony because everyone else but Jonah turns away from idolatry to worship the one true God. Even as Jonah is confined to the belly of the great fish, the pagan sailors are offering sacrifices to Yahweh. In chapter 4 the whole city of idol worshipping Ninevites will forsake their idols and turn to God. But at the end of the story we still don't know if Jonah, a leader of God's people, will forsake his own little idols and come back to the true God.
 - We learn from this that the human heart is always bent toward worshipping things other than God. We learn from this that even Christians, and Christian leaders, tend to grab onto idols.

WHAT IS IDOLATRY?

- As modern, civilized, and educated people we scoff at the idea that we would ever worship idols. This is because we only think of idolatry in terms of ancient, uncivilized, uneducated people bowing before a wooden statue.
 - But if you give this even a moment's thought you know this is far too simplistic. Before a sculptor carves an idol he must first have an image in his mind of what he wants to carve.
 - Before anyone shapes a statue with their hands, it is first shaped in the imagination of their mind.
- That is why God said to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 14, **“Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts.”** Do you see it then? **(SHOW SLIDE 6) An idol is whatever holds ultimate place in our hearts.**
 - The reason people carve statues is because they are trying to represent physically what their hearts already hold in ultimate esteem.
- Additionally, we can see that **(SHOW SLIDE 7) idols are most often created from good things, not evil things.**
 - For instance, in ancient times people worshipped statues of Aphrodite – the goddess of physical beauty. Is physical beauty an evil thing? No, God is the creator of beauty and beauty is therefore inherently good.
 - But when a man or woman lives for their physical appearance, when they spend huge amounts of money on it and evaluate their entire self-worth on their looks then beauty has been deified. Beauty, a good thing, has become the idol of Aphrodite.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Idolatry is making a good thing into an ultimate thing. It is when a good thing becomes a god-thing.** Anything can become an idol.

- Tim Keller writes that **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** “[An idol] is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. . . . An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”²
- For some people it is a relationship. Relationships are a good thing but when you look to another person to provide you with that deep sense of love and meaning that only God can give, then you have made that person into your functional god.
 - Sex is a good thing when enjoyed within marriage but when you are willing to break God’s good laws about sexuality then you are saying that your own pleasure is more important than God.
- Achievement in your field is a good thing but when you forget to praise others in your success, when you get angry for being passed over, when you are willing to be unethical to succeed, or when you base your self-image on your success, then achievement, a good thing, has become the god that you worship.
 - Approval from others is a good thing. But when you live and die by the opinions of others, when your greatest fear is rejection, when you won’t speak up for what is right for fear of disapproval, when you exaggerate stories to make yourself look good, then approval, a good thing, has become your god-thing.
- So how can you identify your personal idols? Ask yourself the following questions:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) First, what are you most passionate about?**
 - What do you find yourself talking about and dreaming about? What do you freely and joyfully spend your money on? What are you most passionate about?
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Second, what is your greatest nightmare?**
 - What is it that if God took it away you would walk away? There you will find what is most precious to you.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Third, where do you consistently disobey God’s word?**
 - If you are willing like Jonah to disobey God then clearly that thing has become the true god that you serve.
- So that is the first point. Since God alone can give all that we need, we must beware of our tendency to grab on to idols. What are your idols?
 - Understanding your tendency to idolatry so that you can identify your idols is only the first step to freedom. Step #2 to freedom is seeing that these idols we give ourselves to cannot really satisfy us.

EXPOSING HOW THE IDOLS BREAK APART IN OUR HANDS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Second, since God alone can give all that we need, we must expose how the idols break apart in our hands.**
 - In this verse Jonah says two things about the futility of idol worship. First, he describes the idols as vain/worthless. **READ 8a – Those who pay regard to vain idols.** The gods of the sailors were worthless. They could not stop the storm like Yahweh could.
 - The idols promise us meaning, fulfillment, and happiness. They may even deliver for a short time. But in the end, we all learn with Tyson that they cannot fill that hole in our hearts.
 - Second he says that those who cling to these worthless idols **“forsake their hope of steadfast love.”** When people serve idols they lose out on the steadfast love that could be theirs from God. We grip onto our idols so tightly but in the end they crumble and break apart in our hands.

² Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, pg xvii, xviii.

- Even the most thoughtful non-Christians recognize this. I think of David Foster Wallace who is considered to be one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century. Before he committed suicide he spoke these words to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14) “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. (SHOW SLIDE 15) Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they’re unconscious. They are default settings.”**³
- Think about how the idol of career achievement will break apart in your hands. One of the most recent and powerful examples is from Michael Jordan. Jordan is without question the greatest basketball player to ever play the game and is one of the most famous people on the planet. ESPN senior writer Michael Thompson wrote a long article on Jordan when he turned 50.
 - The number one thing that comes across in the article is that Jordan is not happy. Jordan says, **“Man, I wish I was playing right now. I would give up everything now to go back and play the game of basketball.”** When asked how he replaces it, Jordan simply states, **“You don’t. You learn to live with it.”**
- Thompson writes, **“His self-esteem has always been, as he says, ‘tied directly to the game.’ Without it, he feels adrift. Who am I? What am I doing? For the past 10 years, since retiring for the third time, he has been running, moving as fast as he could, creating distractions, distance.**
 - **In his . . . 2009 Hall of Fame speech, Jordan called the game of basketball his ‘refuge,’ the ‘place where I’ve gone when I needed to find comfort and peace.’** Jordan’s drive to be the best basketball player of all time came with a price tag.
 - Thompson writes, **“And as the flicker of immortality fades, Jordan stares in the mirror, wondering where to turn. ‘How can I enjoy the next 20 years without so much of this consuming me?’ he asks, sitting beside his desk. . . . ‘How can I find peace away from the game of basketball?’”**⁴
- Can you hear it? Jordan placed all his hope for meaning and happiness in the achievements and success he worked so hard for. But at the end of the day these things are not satisfying him. He is restless and unhappy.
 - We need to hear stories of people like Jordan because the distance between him and us is not so great. We too have a tendency to give ourselves over to things like achievement and career success in order that we might find peace and meaning. The only difference is that almost none of us will reach the top of our respective fields. That is why we need to listen to people like Jordan. His yelling to us from the top saying, **“the idols that I held so tightly, the idols I thought would bring me peace and meaning, they have all broken apart in my hands.”**
 - When the ultimate thing you live for is personal achievement, career success, and being known, you will find it breaking apart in your hands.
- Or think about the idol of romantic relationships will break apart in your hands.

³ Emily Bobrow, “David Foster Wallace, in His Own Words” (taken from his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College).

⁴ http://espn.go.com/espn/story/_/page/Michael-Jordan/michael-jordan-not-left-building

- Do you remember when movie stars Demi Moore and Ashton Kutchner got divorced. In an article Demi Moore confessed the following: **(SHOW SLIDE 16) “What scares me is that I’m going to ultimately find out at the end of my life that I’m not really loveable, that I’m not worthy of being loved, that there’s something fundamentally wrong with me. . . . The fight against gravity for me is to find that love for myself that gives me the courage to reach my fullest potential.”**⁵
 - Can you hear it? The human heart craves love. This is a good thing. But when we try to find in another person what can ultimately only be found in God, we find that they cannot satisfy us.
- Think about our need for approval.
 - If this is your functional god you will forever find it breaking apart in your hands. Just when you finally gain the approval of someone something will happen that will cause their opinion of you to change.
 - You will be on a never-ending roller coaster of highs and lows. You will live with perpetual anxiety because you will never really know if you have that person’s approval which you crave so much.
- So you see, if you are going to move to freedom you not only have to see the idols in your life, you need to expose their false promises. You need to see that if you put your ultimate trust in them they will only break apart in your hands.
 - But this is not enough. It is not enough to just identify and expose your idols. In the end you have to release your grip on them. How does this happen?

SEIZING ONTO THE GRACE OF GOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE 17) Third, since God alone can give all that we need, we must seize on to His grace.**
 - What was it that enabled Jonah to understand the truth of verse 8? What changed him so that he saw the futility of fleeing to Tarshish? It was a profound experience of the grace of God. He knew that he deserved to drown for his idolatry but God, in his grace, rescued Jonah. This changes him.
 - He sees now that when we give ourselves over to idols we forfeit the love that could be ours? But we wonder if Jonah has really got it yet? Does he think that the idol worshipping sailors will have lost all hope of grace? It seems that Jonah has understood grace for himself but not for others.
- We know that grace has changed Jonah because chapter 2 ends the same way that chapter 1 does. Chapter 1 ends with the sailors turning away from their idols. Look back at 1:15-16. **READ 15-16 – So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.**
 - Now look at how chapter 2 ends. After Jonah makes this statement we read in verse 9. **READ 9 – But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”**
 - He has experienced the saving grace of God. This has so captivated him that he burst out in praise. The proof that it has changed him is that once he is back on dry land he gives up his idolatrous plans to go to Tarshish and, in obedience to God, goes to Nineveh.
- You see, it is the grace and love of God that will change your heart. Your heart only releases its grip on an idol when it is captivated by what God has done for you in Jesus.

⁵ Cited in *People*, Jan 16, 2012.

- If you are holding a glass of dirty water and then someone puts a clean glass of water in front of you, you will gladly and joyfully release your grip on the dirty water.
 - What we all need to see is that Jesus is far more satisfying than anything else. You need to see that God alone can give you that deep satisfaction you are looking for.
- When you see God’s grace and love toward you in Jesus it enables you to release your grip on the idol of approval. How? Because you see that in Jesus you have the approval of the only opinion that truly matters. You see that in Jesus you have God’s full approval.
 - When you see God’s grace and love toward you in Jesus it enables you to release your grip on the idol of relationships. How? Because you see that although you are not worthy to be loved, in Jesus you are more loved than you could possibly imagine. When you learn deep down that nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, you are free to love others for who they are instead of trying to get them to fill that need in your heart that only God can fill.
 - When you see God’s grace and love toward you in Jesus it enables you to release your grip on the idol of beauty. When you see that because of what Jesus did God has taken you as his bride and that because of Jesus He views you as perfectly beautiful then you are free from trying to build up your self-worth through your physical appearance.
- When you see God’s grace and love toward you in Jesus it enables you to release your grip on the idol of sex. How? Because of what Jesus has done in reconciling you back to God you begin to experience the pleasure of his presence. You know that the pure in heart get to see God and seeing the face of God far surpasses any pleasure that sex has to offer.
 - When you see God’s grace and love toward you in Jesus it enables you to release your grip on the idol of achievement. Jesus came into the world to do for you what you could not do for yourself. He brought you salvation. He achieved the perfect life that we cannot achieve. He achieved the forgiveness of our sins by dying on the cross. He achieved our right standing with God and all that we will enjoy for eternity by rising from the dead.
 - Because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, you do not have to achieve to be somebody. In Jesus, you are somebody, loved and cherished by God. When you find your refuge, peace, and comfort in what Jesus achieved, then nothing can ever take that way from you.
- The 17th century puritan author named Jeremiah Burroughs once wrote, **(SHOW SLIDE 18) “the reason why you have not got contentment in the things of this world is not because you have not got enough of them – that is not the reason – but the reason is, because they are not proportionable to that immortal soul of yours that is capable of God himself.”**⁶
 - Or as Augustine famously said in the 4th century: **(SHOW SLIDE 19) “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”**

CONCLUSION

- I am sure there are some of you here today who do not know the meaning, joy, and peace that I am talking. You are not a Christian. But you know that ache in your soul. You know that at the very core of your being, you are missing something. That something is God. Today Jesus invites you to come to him. Lay down your idols before Him.
 - Many of you are Christians. You can see how your heart is always tending toward worshipping things other than God. Turn away from your idols. Worship God alone. Make him supreme in your life.
 - Since God alone can give us all we need, we must turn from idols to Him.

⁶ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel Of Christian Contentment*, 91.