

Shutting Down the Idol Factory

Part 9 – Who Really Needs a Savior?

Luke 15:1-7

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 22, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:1-7, NRSV)

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Nine weeks ago we began this sermon series on idolatry with a simple premise that an idol is any good thing in this life which we make into an ultimate thing. Along the way we have talked about a lot of good things we make into ultimate things: the acceptance of others, financial security, our children, wanting to be first in life, our time and using it productively, having a soul mate, and even beauty and physical strength. All of these are good things, of course. Every last one. None of them, however, are ultimate things which means that when we try and elevate them to that level, expecting them to be the source and foundation of our identity, our security and our meaning in life, they will inevitably fail us. .

Well, I’ve saved the best for last. (Or the worst for last as the case may be.) Today we are going to look at the greatest and most widely-revered idol of all, an idol that I suspect all of us have worshipped at one time or another.

As I’ve done in past weeks I want to introduce this idol by introducing one of the Greek gods. This one actually needs no introduction. In ancient Greece Zeus was the ruler of all other gods. He gained his position by overthrowing his father, Cronus, and then by drawing lots with his brothers Poseidon and Hades to decide who would succeed their father on the throne. Zeus won and became the presiding deity of the universe, the one who was to be worshipped above all other gods.

Zeus ruled with thundering authority. Literally. His weapon was a lightning bolt which he would hurl at those who displeased or defied him. He ruled the other gods, commanding them to perform their duties and punishing their misdeeds. As the father of all humankind, he also took a paternal interest in the actions and well-being of mortals. When people were true and charitable and fair he would reward them with tender kindness. When they were evil and cruel and disobedient, however, they would be severely punished.¹

It is here in this description of Zeus that we see the classic understanding of the divine that extends beyond ancient Greece theology and into nearly all religions of all cultures of all times. It goes like this. There is some all-powerful deity or force which is over us and beyond us and that deity or force is in possession of something we would like to also possess. That might be eternal life, or a paradise beyond this earth, or blessing, or material wealth, or pleasure, or freedom, or peace, or a thousand other things. Whatever it is, God has what we want but to get what we want we must pay some price. Usually that means that you must conform your life to a certain way of living and thinking. In other words, you must obey God, follow the rules of your higher power, and live in the way you have been told you must live. If you do then in the end you will be rewarded. If you don’t, then you will be punished.

¹ Source - <http://www.greekmythology.com/Olympians/Zeus/zeus.html>

Understand that this is not just how the ancient Greeks looked at Zeus. This is the way that most people down through history, in most times and most places, have seen things as well.

Now, think carefully here. In this classic understanding of the divine who is the savior? What is it that helps us to get from where we are to where we want to be? How does a person get from this life to the afterlife, to heaven, to paradise, to eternal life, to Nirvana, to a higher sense of being, to whatever you want to call it? In this picture, who is the savior? Well, it's certainly not God. If Zeus were a savior than all people would be saved. Right? That's what saviors do, they save people. But Zeus does not save all people. Zeus saves and blesses only the people who live a good life. That means that Zeus is not a savior but merely one who gives you what you deserve. When he blesses you, you are not being saved you are being rewarded.

So if not Zeus, who or what *is* the savior? A good and righteous life. In the classic picture of religion, exemplified by Zeus but replicated by most every religious tradition, *the savior of humanity is not the god of humanity but rather the goodness of humans*. You are not saved because some god has given you a gift; you are saved because you have earned a reward. And salvation that is a reward is not salvation at all.

Most every religion in the history of the world adopts this understanding of the divine in one form or another. In fact, it may be that only Christianity, rightly understood, paints a different picture. For you see, there is nothing in the Christian Gospel that suggests that our savior is our own good works. We cannot ever and will not ever be saved by our own goodness. This is the truth, but a truth which sadly many, many people sitting today in churches like this one have yet to embrace.



The other night I folded all the laundry. That's a big deal because I hardly ever fold the laundry. When my wife came home and saw what I was doing she was immediately suspicious. I sure she thought I was either ill or guilty. Truth is, I was neither. I just decided to do a chore I don't normally do and to reward myself I watched a little television. PBS was airing a documentary on the life and career of Johnny Carson, the long-time host of The Tonight Show. As I sat matching socks I was immediately engrossed.

As most of you remember, Johnny Carson was the enormously successful King of Late Night television, beloved by a whole nation who ended each day with his self-effacing charm and humor. This adoration of others, however, came at high price. In his pursuit of success Carson went through several marriages, sacrificed close relationships with his three sons, compromised his own health with habitual smoking and drinking, and came to mistrust people so much that he ended his life in relative seclusion.

Why? Well, one of the things the documentary revealed was that Carson's own mother, Ruth, was always highly critical of her son. In spite of his enormous success, even when he was at the pinnacle of his field, she never acknowledged to him that he had done well. She was his toughest judge and she always remained skeptical. At one point, a reporter doing a cover story for Time Magazine sat with Ruth Carson as she watched her son's monologue. When he had finished she said, "That wasn't funny." Then she simply got up and left the room.

Ruth Carson died in 1985. Shortly afterwards workers cleaning out her Arizona home discovered a box filled with hundreds of newspaper and magazine clippings dating back to the beginning of her son's career. As it turns out, all along she'd been proud of her son but her son never knew it. Johnny Carson kept the box in his bedroom closet for the rest of his life.²

Imagine the lengths a man will go to just to be rewarded the favor of his own highly critical mother. Now imagine what happens to a person when they see God in the same way. What happens to a person who believes that the favor of our Creator must be earned, that God will not allow you to receive his blessings or to come to be with him unless you live up to some certain high standard he has set for you? Imagine the crushing burden on a person's soul if they never feel as if they can live up to those standards. Some of us don't have to imagine it. Sadly, many of us have lived it.

² American Masters documentary, "Johnny Carson: King of Late Night" – watch the full documentary here:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/johnny-carson-king-of-late-night/watch-the-full-documentary/2093/>

One day Jesus went to a dinner party. This was not uncommon. Jesus went to a lot of parties and they always included food. Like this one, they also often included some colorful party guests. Tax collectors were at this particular party, men who were so hated by everybody else that they were never invited to dinner parties. Other dinner guests were simply identified as 'sinners'. Likely these were people who were hopelessly irreligious, completely out of touch with who God was and what demands God had put on a human life for righteous living. It must have been quite a party. And Jesus was there.

The religious leaders were not pleased. "Who is this man?" they asked in disgust. "He welcomes sinners and even sits down to eat with them." You see the problem? How could Jesus be a representative of God if he associated with people God did not associate with? By this point some people had even begun to suspect that Jesus was making claims to be the very Son of God. Impossible! God only accepts and blesses people who have shown themselves worthy of such acceptance and blessing, and the people Jesus was calling his friends were nowhere near being worthy of such blessing and acceptance.

Again, here's the problem. What do you do with people who clearly are not living the sorts of lives that will earn them the favor of heaven? Well, there are two classic ways of dealing with this problem. Briefly, I want to outline them both for you.

The first way of dealing the problem is to get these people to stop being sinners. If God will not associate with you because of the way you are living then you need to start living in a way that will make God want to associate with you. This is the way the religious leaders in the story dealt with the problem. Follow the law, keep the commandments, associate with the right people, say the right prayers, believe the right things, and you will earn God's favor.

The second way of dealing with the problem is to simply stop seeing these people as sinners in the first place. You don't have to admit that they're perfect because clearly they're not perfect. But if you look hard enough you can see good in these people as there is good in all people, enough good certainly to curry the favor of God.

Now, I believe that every one of us in this room has a tendency within us to solve this problem with one of these two solutions. The thing is, they're both really the same solution. Each of them, in its own way, sets up human goodness as an idol. Each of them suggests that there is potentially enough of the right sort of character, or right-living, or right belief in us all to save us in the end.

This is obvious in the first solution. In the same way that much of Johnny Carson's driven-ness to succeed in life was likely rooted in his deep desire to earn the favor of his own mother, there are many of us that are equally driven to live a good life because we hope to merit God's favor and reward in the end. When we feel we have succeeded we are filled with a self-righteous pride, the sort of which we often saw in the religious leaders of Jesus' day. On the other hand, when we feel we have failed we are filled with a crushing shame and guilt which will slowly suck all the joy and peace from our lives.

The idol is not so obvious in the second solution but it's just as present and, I would say, even more widespread in our day than is the first. In fact, I have conversations with people all the time who hate to talk about sin. They hate the very word itself and would prefer that we don't ever use it in church. "Why can't we just affirm the goodness in people?" they say. "Why do we always have to keep talking about sin?"

And I would say that, yes, there is goodness in all people. There is most certainly great worth in all people because all people are made in the image of God. There is goodness in us all but there is never enough goodness. And that's the point.

Remember, we serve a God who, though his Son, made clear to us that there are *only two commandments* we are to follow. Just two. First, love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Put Him first over all things with every fiber of your being in every moment of your life no matter what circumstance comes your way. Second, love your neighbor as you love yourself. In intention and action always seek the goodwill of every person on this planet at all times. Do these two things and you will be considered a good and righteous person.

So let me ask you, who here has succeeded? Who here is good and righteous enough according to Jesus' standards. I can't speak for you but I have not and am not. A great deal of my life has been lived in stubborn rebellion of the God I

am called to love. Time after time I put something other than God first in my life. Usually it's myself. On top of that, a great deal of my life has also been lived in stubborn refusal to love certain people I simply do not want to love. If I'm honest I have to admit that I have often not even loved my own family, or the people in my own church, as much as I love myself.

So maybe this second solution to the problem works for you. It doesn't for me. I have come to agree with the scriptures about my own lack of goodness. In Romans 3 Paul quotes the Old Testament Psalm, saying, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God."³

Still, there are people who hate it when we talk about such things in church. Do you know why? We hate to face the reality that we all are sinful and not one of us is morally good in God's eyes and deserving of his favor because we have set up human goodness as our idol. And when your idol is threatened, when the very foundation of your identity, your security and purpose in life is challenged, of course you become upset. I'd be upset too!

Can you see that both these solutions to the problem are equally embracing worship of the very same empty idol? The first solution rejects the need of Jesus Christ as a savior because my own efforts at goodness, if I try hard enough, can save me. But the second solution also rejects the need of Jesus Christ as a savior because of the fact that I'm already a good person simply by the way God made me and that is enough to save me. On both accounts it's not Christ who saves humans but human goodness which saves humans.

And suddenly Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, while perhaps still a great demonstration of his love for us, is not actually necessary for human salvation. And not only is it not necessary, we may even begin to resent the very thought of it.

Think of it this way. Imagine you're taking a very important test and that your life depends on you receiving a passing grade for that test. You believe that you know the answers to the test, that you have what it takes within yourself to pass the test and spare your life. But then somebody else comes along and takes the test for you, receiving on your behalf a passing grade. Would you be grateful? Of course not! You could have done it yourself! And now, because this other person did it for you, you feel somehow as if you are indebted to them and you didn't want to be indebted.

Why are we so afraid to let go of the idea that we are good enough, or that we can make ourselves good enough, to earn God's favor? It is simply because we do not yet understand, or believe, in the necessity of God's grace and the reality that it is sufficient.

In response to the idolatry of human goodness Jesus sees in the religious leaders who scorn him for his choice of dinner companions, Jesus tells a simply story. A shepherd has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes off into the wilderness to search for the one. When he finds it he is filled with joy, so much so that he calls all his friends and neighbors together for a party to help celebrate. It's a simple story every one of us can understand.

Jesus does not embrace our solutions to the great problem of how humans find their way to the life and blessing of God. Efforts to be good enough will never be good enough. Telling yourself that you are already good enough is only an exercise of delusion and denial. We are *all* like these sheep, all of us lost. Some of us may be like the one sheep who knew it was lost and, in the end, was grateful to be found. Others of us, tragically, are like the ninety-nine sheep who never imagined they were lost in the first place.

"I tell you," Jesus says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Don't miss his sarcasm. The ninety-nine represent the religious leaders who look self-righteously at these 'lost sheep' Jesus has chosen as dinner companions. The ninety-nine are those who think they have made themselves good enough or who believe they are already inherently good enough. And heaven does not rejoice over them. Heaven only rejoices over the sheep who knows it is lost and who is brought home by the Good Shepherd who risks everything to save its life.

The most famous hymn in our hymnal includes this line, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Not long ago people who worship at the altar of human goodness made a move to remove that word 'wretch' so

³ Romans 3:10-11, citing Psalm 14:3.

that we sing, instead, “that saved one just like me.” Why do we have such a hard time confessing our wretchedness? It is for this simple reason. We dare not confess the depth of our sin unless we know the even greater depth of God’s grace. *But once you know the depth of God’s amazing grace, you can sing out that you are a wretch and do so with joy because you have been convinced that your identity and your security and your meaning do not depend upon your own goodness in any way but, instead, are rooted in the love and grace of your Father in Heaven who gave his only Son to die for us all that we could come home and be called his beloved sons and daughters.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 says it as beautifully as ever, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”⁴ This is the most central and most unique claim of the Christian Gospel. While most other religious perspectives have adopted, in one form or another, the Greek perspective of Zeus that the blessings of the divine must, in some way, be earned, the Christian Gospel sets people free because it alone claims that it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ received in faith that saves us and not our own good works or good nature. It is, in fact, only in Christianity that God is actually understood rightly as our Savior.

This is why those who come to let go of this idol of human goodness and worship, instead, at the feet of Christ are moved to sacrifice everything for him, not in an effort to earn God’s favor but *in grateful response to God’s favor.*

Pastor and writer Tim Keller tells the story of a woman he met some years ago at his church. She told him that she had gone to church her whole life and had always heard that God accepts us only when we were sufficiently good and ethical. She had never before heard the message you just heard and which she was now hearing at Tim Keller’s church, the message that we are saved by God by sheer grace through the work of Christ regardless of what we do or have done.

Her response to this message was what struck Keller. “That’s a very *scary* idea!” she said. “Oh, it’s good scary, but still scary.” When asked what she meant she went on to tell him something like this,

If I was saved by my good works – then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – at God’s infinite cost – then there’s nothing he cannot now ask of me.⁵

If the grace of God does not lead you to willingly give your life away to God, to offer yourself completely and wholeheartedly to him, to trust him in all things and at all times, then you likely have never yet understood or experienced the grace of God. Jesus never excuses our sin. Remember that the one sheep in his parable represents, in his words, the sinner who needs to repent. But the sinner does not need to repent to be saved; the sinner repents because he comes to see he desperately needs salvation and then sees that in Christ salvation is already his.

And in response, heaven throws a party.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 15:1-7. This may be a familiar story so try to see it from a fresh perspective. What do you notice?
2. The Pharisees are upset by Jesus’ choice of dinner companions. What’s the big deal about eating with ‘sinners’?
3. Verse 7 is the punchline of Jesus’ parable. He says, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” What does he mean? In which category are you, the one or the ninety-nine?

⁴ NRSV

⁵ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 135-6.

4. Are you a good person? By what standards do you make your judgment?
5. Some people hate it when we talk about sin even though the Bible speaks of it openly and often. Why?
6. How have you worshipped at the idol of human goodness? How have you imagined that God's favor towards you is, in any way, dependent upon your good works or right beliefs?
7. Consider this quote by Richard Lovelace from his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. What do you think he means? Do you agree?

“We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification [i.e. our good works], and when this posture is adopted it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security resting not on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christian life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace.”

8. What do you think about the story of the woman who finally heard the message that we are saved by grace alone and responded, “That’s a very scary idea! If it’s really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – at God’s infinite cost – then there’s nothing he cannot now ask of me.”