

Talk 3:
A Necessary Grace

There were several moments in the popular book, *The Shack*, that I really liked, but I think one of my favorites was when Sarayu (the Holy Spirit) takes Mack out to work in the garden—and they begin to work hard pulling out these seemingly healthy looking plants (with deep roots) in order to prepare a special place to plant something anew. And how Mack kept saying this place is a mess—as they together were working to bring order in the chaos. The chaos it turns out was his soul they were gardening together—cooperating to get the necessary soul work done. The spiritual life is a cultivated life—and our prayer as you leave today is that some work has been done or at least begun in your soul to bring necessary order in your spiritual life. I hope even addressing the topic of idolatry has reminded you to center your life and world on God and Jesus Christ.

Unmasking idols is not an easy thing but it is clearly a good thing—even though it will always be received badly by society and by your soul. The unmasking of idols, however, is not simply a Christian duty because of our love for the true God—who alone is worthy of devotion—but also a Christian duty because of our love for those who do not worship the true God. And before we are able, with integrity, to unmask the idol-worship of those we love—we need to be honest about our own failures. And what we do with them.

Let us pray...

Continuing in the story of Exodus, after the Ten Commandments are given in Exod 20, chapters 21-23 record what has become known as the “Covenant Code” which includes case law instructions, social responsibilities, and Sabbath and festival ordinances. This is followed in chapter 24 with the ratification of the covenant in ceremonial fashion with offerings and a reading of the Book of the Covenant. Let me read part of this, Exod. 24:3-8:

“When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the LORD has said we will do.” Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said: we will obey.” Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

This not only sounds like serious business, it is serious business. God and his people have entered into a covenant together. They will be his people and he will be their God. An agreement of blessing for the people of God in order to fulfill God’s purpose of blessing the world through them.

After this, chapters 25-31 record God's specific instructions on the means of worship including the building and contents of the tabernacle, the consecration of the priests, and the choice and gifting of the builders and decorators of the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant, the atonement cover, and more. It is directly after these specific instructions on proper worship that, in Exodus 32, the people ask Aaron to make "gods" who will go before them—and the calf is fashioned out of their gold earrings brought to Aaron... On one level this is hard to believe that the people could do this, and we want to excuse them because of their suffering and prolonged captivity—perhaps they didn't know any better. But there is no denying God's burning anger and Moses' acknowledgement, "Oh what a great sin these people have committed."

The echo from their saying together, "We will obey!" has barely dissipated when this happens. Let me make a quick observation between what happens here (Exod. 32:5-6) and what I just read from Exod. 24:

"When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."

What is missing here? The reading of the Book of the Covenant is obviously left out. Instead of having it read aloud followed by the people saying together, "We will obey," the people party. They have broken and abandoned the covenant—ignoring the rightful and loving claim of God on their lives. A claim which they are to be reminded of with a reading of this Book. And though God does have mercy on them eventually, it comes at a large cost to those directly responsible for the sin.

[This is the passage you will be discussing today]

This pattern of faithfulness, failure, and grace is not just Israel's story—it's our story.

And before I talk a bit more about that, I truly sense the need to share this... I have shared this before, but I often need reminded of this so I thought it worthy to say again. A pastoral mentor of mine was once asked, "*What keeps your relationship with God alive?*" And his answer has been life-giving to me, he said:

"What keeps my relationship with God alive? The short answer is God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It took me a long time to start living this. I was immersed in a Christian culture that dumped advice on me nonstop about how to maintain a 'vital' relationship with God. And I did everything anybody told me to do. I got pretty good at it. But the better I got at it the more my relationship with God suffered. Gradually I began to understand what the church had been teaching for centuries, namely, that it is God's nature to seek us out and draw us into participation with what He is doing. *I realized that He was a lot more*

interested in my relationship with Him than I was. I relaxed. I began to cultivate quiet, listening, and ordinary obedience. The less interested I became in 'keeping my relationship with God alive,' the more I was able to notice and participate in what God was doing to keep me in relationship with Him.

What keeps your relationship with God alive? If your first answer is anything other than God, then that's a wrong answer. Even "maintaining a vital relationship" with God can become an idol which is a sick trick of Satan. And the last thing I would want is for you to feel burdened by this weekend to "maintain your relationship with God." God is more interested in your relationship with him than you are. Notice him, listen to him, and simply and ordinarily obey him...

We know however, that the unfolding story of Israel is our story as well... the people, even after being settled in the promised land, have an ongoing struggle with the temptations of "Egypt." The power and wealth that the nation represents is almost too much to resist—and much of the prophetic writing in Jeremiah and Isaiah is dedicated to the reminder of the sin and devastation of idolatry, a reminder that idols always fail to deliver and are powerless to save or protect:

Isaiah 31: 1-3:

¹Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD. ² Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; **he does not take back his words.** He will rise up against the house of the wicked, against those who help evildoers. ³ **But the Egyptians are men and not God;** their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together.

Egypt embodies the temptation to turn to idolatrous superpowers rather than God in times of trouble. Who or what will they rely on in time of need? What must be their greatest nightmare? After being delivered and established as God's treasured possession, they were fearful of being taken over by another nation so they were turning to Egypt and Assyria for treaties and assistance. Here is Jeremiah's word about the same thing:

Jeremiah 2:1-13

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. ³ Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them," declares the LORD. ⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel. ⁵This is what the LORD says: "What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? **They followed worthless idols and**

became worthless themselves. ⁶They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?' ⁷I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. ⁸The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols. ⁹"Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the LORD. "And I will bring charges against your children's children. ¹⁰Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: ¹¹Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. ¹²Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. ¹³**My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.**

That image of digging broken cisterns while God offers himself as the spring of living water has been helpful to me in renewing my focus on God. And then these words smack in the middle of this prophetic sadness and recounting of the sins of Israel and Judah, (Jer. 3:14-15) "Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you and bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding."

The people of God have no hope apart from this gesture from God, this grace of God. They have broken the covenant again as they did in the desert at Sinai, but this necessary grace of God appears to restore the broken relationship. What is necessary on the part of the people is a 'return,' a saying no to the lies they have bought into, and a saying yes to God. As I included in your devotional this morning, "The first step toward God is a step away from the lies of the world." This is living God-ward, this is living with a ready repentance from where we will veer off course.

Eugene Peterson writes one of the better definitions of repentance, "Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts." Repentance is a decision to follow hard a course where what God wants from you and what you want from God are achieved together; it's like gardening... sometimes easy, sometimes hard, usually slow-going. But a decision on your part is necessary—repentance is a decision to follow Jesus Christ—and as I shared yesterday morning, to allow him to be the true center of the world (true center of your world) while the world ought to be in continual movement toward him.

I want to close with a few Scriptures that have been helpful to me as I prepared these talks and reflected upon the idols in my life and what to do about them.

The author of Hebrews writes,

¹²See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold firmly till the end our original conviction.”

Be encouraged today. Don't turn away from God. And turn to Christ. Daily. It is because we share in Christ that Hebrews later reveals that we can “Approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

And because sometimes I need a more direct route of resistance to the things looking to knock God to the margins, I added this Scripture to your morning's devotion:

James 4:7-8 “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

This sense of single-hearted devotion, repentance, confession, and purity is a roadmap for the way to God. Approach with confidence and God approaches with grace.

God desires and calls forth such single-hearted devotion... and makes it possible for us to accomplish it through Jesus Christ.

And I'll close with a remarkable (and perhaps familiar) prayer I pray to accomplish the above “wash your hands and purify your hearts.”

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration [breathing in] of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord.” Amen