



I have issues. I need help. Not that I needed a recent reminder, but I got one anyway. After tossing, giving away, selling all kinds of stuff in Wisconsin, I thought we had really slimmed down on stuff. And you know what? It felt really good. Yet we packed and loaded box after box of stuff into that van, only our bare essentials we thought. Our van arrived on the Peninsula on Thursday. A professional mover from CPC helped us unload into a storage unit and into our one bedroom apartment.

I thought we had done really well, but box after box came out of that van. Why did I need to keep 60 33½ vinyl records. Did I really need my Van Halen, Styxx, ELO and Bee Gee LP's from high school? I don't even own a record player. Why did I feel the need to keep my band helmet from high school? Am I going to wear it to my next reunion?

When I think about it we unloaded 10,000 pounds of stuff into a 10x15 storage unit that is costing us \$279 a month. The way I calculate it, in one year I could probably replace just about everything in that storage unit new for \$279 a month. I told a guy from church about this, and he said, "Hey let me go straighten my garage and you can store your stuff in my garage and I will only charge you \$200 a month." We laughed about how we think we each got into the wrong business.

I have issues. I need help.

What is an idol? There are all kinds of definitions. But here is a definition: any person, place or thing that we make the ultimate thing. A thing we worship, adore or devote ourselves to.

It can be devotion to stuff and what kind of feeling having it produces in us. It can even be a person and what kind of feeling that person produces in us. It can be an activity or substance and what kind of feeling that activity produces in us. It's devotion to a thing that we make the ultimate thing, a thing we worship and truly adore above God. Tim Keller offers this potent definition of sin: "Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry."

It's interesting to study this subject of idol worship. Not only does idol worship lead to all kinds of brokenness, hurt, betrayal, disillusionment and bondage, it does something else. Idol worship breaks God's heart. The scripture says idol worship makes God angry.

What Provokes God to Anger?

Serving false gods

At this point in our Crown and the Fire series, we are introduced to a new character. His name is Ahaziah. He the son of Ahab and Jezebel and he is a king of Israel and lived in Samaria. There isn't much said about Ahaziah, but his life teaches us some really important things about our Christian life.

"Ahaziah son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria...." (1 Kings 22:51)

It goes on to say that he only reigned for two years. Why is that? Two years isn't very long.

"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he walked in the ways of his father and mother and in the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. (You can read about this guy Jeroboam in 1st Kings 12. He was a king of Israel who was afraid, afraid his people would leave him and go to Jerusalem and worship the one true God in the temple, so he made two golden calves and issued an edict for the people of the Kingdom of Israel to worship these idols in Samaria.) He served and worshiped Baal and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father had done" (verses 52–53).

Seeking false oracles

"Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, 'Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron (40 miles southwest of Samaria), to see if I will recover from this injury'" (2 Kings 1:2).

This is a very telling thing that Ahaziah says here. It shows how much the King of Israel had drifted from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Ahaziah was in a tough spot, he was scared. He laid on his bed in pain, unable to move, maybe paralyzed, with no answers about his condition and future and what does he do? He turns to Baal-Zebub for consultation. He turns to Baal-Zebub for an oracle of wisdom. How interesting that Jerusalem was only 25 miles away directly south.

Who is Baal-Zebub? This is the only place this is listed in the Old Testament. Baal-Zebub comes from "Baal" meaning "Lord," and "Zebub" meaning "flies." It's a false God, something made of fancy wood or stone, in this case it was likely a God over Disease, a ruler over the flies that carried disease. Lord of the Flies—probably a

carving shaped like a giant fly. In the New Testament, the Baal-Zebub was used when referring to Satan, a place to seek knowledge and power outside the realm of God. How ironic that when Jesus showed compassion and healed people to glorify God, the religious people accused Jesus of being in partnership with Baal-Zebub (Satan). They accused Jesus of the same sin that Ahaziah was committing.

In this context Ahaziah was seeking an oracle of wisdom about the future. Ahaziah was scared to death. Will I live or die? Baal-Zebub, can you help me, heal me, give me something I can trust in? I need to be back in control, I need comfort, I need strength and power again, I need the respect of my peers and my countrymen again.

Justin Buzzard a good friend of CPC, wrote in his Blog a post titled "That Idol that you love... it doesn't love you back." He gives us an insightful tool to determine which idol lurks in our hearts.

Control. You know you have a control idol if your greatest nightmare is uncertainly.

Approval. You know you have an approval idol if your greatest nightmare is rejection.

Comfort. You know you have a comfort idol if your greatest nightmare is stress or demands.

Power. You know you have a power idol if your greatest nightmare is humiliation or embarrassment.

How can we distinguish if things or people in our lives have crossed over the line into the realm of idol worship? How do we know when something legitimate—a good thing—crosses over and becomes illegitimate—a bad thing. For us who live on the Peninsula, let's look at a few characteristics of idol worship.

An idol often reflects the culture we live in. Technology, work schedule, education, appearances, fashion, entertainment and nature are all things that can move from the legitimate to the illegitimate. Probably a good question to ask ourselves is this: "What is it that non-Christ followers in my culture worship? Am I any different?" When we make that decision to turn to the promises our culture makes to meet our needs we cross over from legitimate to illegitimate. When we do that we become like those that don't know God and that saddens God deeply.

There seems to be a repetitive nature to idol worship. We find that when stress or boredom or crises creeps into our lives, we are driven back to this thing over and over again. How many time have some of us said, "I can quit this bad habit, this sin, anytime I want. But deep down we know the truth about ourselves, the truth about our loved one, our family member, we are not willing to give it up and we repeat and repeat and repeat and it becomes an idol to us.

An idol obscures and competes with who God is. We read in our E100 about how quickly the Israelites turned aside from the God

of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had so faithfully delivered them from slavery and then bowed down to the golden calf. How could that not sadden God?

How can I tell if something is obscuring and competing for God's attention in my life? I can tell because I worship it. I give it attention and time and money. I build an altar to it and I sacrifice the very best part of who I am to that thing. God calls us to sacrifice the best in our worship. When I worship an idol I sacrifice the best I am to it and give God the leftovers.

When something moves from legitimate to illegitimate we will surround and protect that thing with rationalizations and excuses. I need that latest and greatest technology to make my life simpler. I deserve a break. I need to escape into this little pleasure center because I am under so much stress lately and after all it doesn't hurt anybody. That thing you have wrapped tightly in a cocoon of excuses? That is likely your Idol. How do I know that? Because that's what I do.

Let's continue with our story. Now our prophet Elijah enters into the life of Ahab's son Ahaziah.

"But the angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, 'Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?' Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!' So Elijah went" (verses 3-4).

So God sends a special messenger, an angel, to Elijah to tell him to get up and go and intercept the messengers sent by Ahaziah to Baal-Zebub. It's pretty clear that God didn't want those messengers to have any contact with the dark satanic powers of this god of Ekron.

God is literally saying to Elijah, Stop them! And you ask them, "Is there no other God that you can consult? Why do you run off to Ekron? Now you messengers go back to Ahaziah and tell him that his very act, the very decision he has made to consult a false God, will result in a terminal condition. Your king will never get better."

"The king asked them, 'What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?' (I could see Ahaziah laying there, Oh no. Don't tell me... Elijah again? I thought he was hiding out somewhere praying and fasting. Will he ever leave me and my family alone? Maybe it wasn't Elijah? Was it the hairy guy? Oh please say no.) They replied, 'He was a man with a garment of hair (literally in the original language, Baal or Lord of the hair.) and with a leather belt around his waist.' The king said, "of course it was... The thorn in my flesh, the bee in my bonnet. I can't catch a break here. 'That was Elijah the Tishbite'" (I wanted the Lord of the Flies, and I got the Lord of the Hair") (verses 7-9).

Ahaziah must have thought, "My dad told me he raised a child from the dead. What else can I fight with? I don't have truth, so maybe my only weapon is intimidation. I will throw all the powers of this world at my disposal at him. I have these soldiers that will do anything I say. I'll throw them at Elijah and scare him like my mom Jezebel did back in 1 Kings 19."

So we provoke God to anger when we worship idols. We provoke his anger when we consult false wisdom. We also provoke God when we place our trust in false institutions such as government, education, financial, military, even religious. These are to be clearly part of civil society, but at their core they are led by sinful people, not God. They rarely deliver what they promise. They are not capable. We see this illustrated as God's power clashes with Ahaziah's military power.

Submitting to false powers

"The he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, 'Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'" (v. 9).

Remember this captain and his 50 men represent to us the false powers of darkness. The secular captain demands that the man of God obey him. But Elijah is not intimidated.

"Elijah answered the captain, 'If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!' Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men" (v. 10).

Once again God's powerful judgment fell on evil. Word of this must have traveled back quickly to the barracks. The hairy man on the mountain was not someone to take lightly.

So now we see a turn of events. We have learned so far what provokes God's anger. Now starting in verse 13 we see what provokes God to pleasure. It starts with this third captain. He was no fool.

What Provokes God to Pleasure?

Renouncing idols

"So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. 'Man of God,' he begged, 'please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!'" (verses 13-14).

We see something is different in this third captain. Instead of intimidation we see humiliation. This third captain, instead of commanding Elijah, pleaded for his life in the face of the true God. He spoke truth. He spoke his heart. He pleaded for God's mercy. He turned away from the false God. He turned away from his false power.

I read a devotional from Nancy Ortberg and then I tried to think of the top five idols we on the Peninsula might likely need to renounce.

The Idol of Materialism. The accumulation of things and the storing up of money. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. If you were to pull a bill out of your wallet what does it say on it? E Pluribus Unim. What else? No. Not cha ching, cha ching. It says In God We Trust. Out of all the things our Founding Fathers could have printed on money, why this little 4-word phrase? Because with that bill in our hands we are tempted not to trust in God. May each of us be reminded when we pull bills out of our wallets that it is In God We Trust. May we not be devoted to things that are perishable.

The Idol of Success. It's not about money or things, it's about competition, about the win. More is never enough; the win is never enough. There is always another win. When we bow at the altar of success we even unknowingly worship people who we see as having succeeded. We see all around us the celebrity cult of worshipping those on top.

The Idol of Self. The selfie idol. I had lunch with a guy this week who shared that he had to pull away from Facebook because he saw his heavy activity to be about either voyeurism, peering into other people's lives, or exhibitionism, telling anybody who will listen how great his life is or how clever and cool he is with his little pictures of his food he posted on Facebook. This God can take different forms. It can look like the God of comfort, the God of retirement, the God of television, the God of hobbies, the God of approval. I can surround myself and insulate myself in substances and experiences that alter my mood. It's about me and what feels good to me, and there I build my altar.

The Idol of Relationships. This is when there is another person in our lives real or imagined to which we give a huge amount of time, thought, attention and energy. Even the most satisfying marriage relationships—mother/child father/child—should never compete with or obscure who God is in my life. But maybe your marriage isn't good; you can fantasize about an ideal person. This can go deeper into idolatry and it can turn into the grip of pornography, and if you don't know how to get out of it, it's an idol for you.

The Idol of Religion. Whether it is worshipping church work, saints, trees or Buddha. Remember the group of people that Jesus accused on earth? These were the religious people who worshipped religion and not the living God. It's the story of the pastor's wife who says, "My husband's mistress is the church, and how can I compete with that?"

Renouncing means to give up by a formal declaration. God is provoked to pleasure when we renounce idols as this third captain did. Why does my cell phone, my Facebook, my TV, my drive to succeed, my attitude toward my children mean so much to

God? How can these really become illegitimate? The Apostle Paul adds his insight into this whole idol-worship-thing. ***“Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons”*** (1 Corinthians 9:20).

On the surface, Baal-Zebub was nothing more than a hunk of wood or stone shaped like a fly, but from it emanated all sorts of demonic-inspired stuff. On the surface my smart phone is an awesome tool that I am so glad to have, but if I can't feel complete without social media, gaming, reading things or viewing pictures of things that turn me away from God, might I be opening up myself to be drawn into things that are not from God? Some of us may be thinking that idol has a grip on me. In reality we have a grip on that idol. God says flee temptation. Some of us need to absolutely remove ourselves from it. You see the altar being built, brick by brick. When you see that in your life, flee it. Renounce it.

Consulting the true oracle

“The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.’ So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king.” He told the king, ‘This is what the Lord says: Is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because you have done this...’ (verses 15-16).

What is the true Oracle? It is the word of God. Without fear, in obedience Elijah went down to the mountain and spoke the word of God. He did it with God's reminder: Do not fear.

We fall in love with idols because we forget. We forget how powerful God is. We forget what he has done and what he promises. We forget that he is near. We fall in love with idols because we get isolated from Christian Community. We need one another to help us remember his promises when we get scared. We need people in our life who know us, who care for us, and who are not afraid to remind us of the truth when we want to escape. Christian Community. Doing life in Community, in Community Groups, can focus us when life gets blurry.

Did you notice in the passage that Ahaziah was high in his upper room, and he never came down from there? Did you notice

that Elijah was up the mountain and then he came down to the people time after time in our series? Ahaziah was up in his lofty perch, and he never came down; he fell down.

It just reminded me how different the God of the Bible is from other gods that seek our worship. Jesus Christ left his place on high and voluntarily came down to earth. Emmanuel, God with us, God in the mess with us. This is the God we worship. A God who comes down to us to meet us in our deepest need. He became flesh, shed blood and tears, died for our sins, and went up to heaven, and then gave us the Holy Spirit to be down with us. Why? Because he is full of grace and truth and therefore above all other gods competing for our worship.

Submitting to the One filled with grace and truth

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

“Who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8).

No demon, no power behind Baal would ever consider doing what Jesus did for us. Are we starting to see what is behind all of this? The scripture says we can provoke his anger, provoke his pleasure, but we could never provoke his love. He loves us no matter what stupid things we do. It turns out, the true God who made me, my Savior who died for me, and in his eyes, not in Baal's eyes, I'm actually profoundly precious, lovable, worthy, valuable and may I have the faith to believe that. The faith to believe anything else we worship is a false god, a false oracle and a false power.

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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