

Picking Our Gods

Our Upside-Down World Series, May 1 & 2, 2021 | Judges 6:25-27

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HOW CAN YOU PICK A DELICIOUS STRAWBERRY?

Strawberry season is just around the corner.

When you're picking strawberries either in the field or in a little plastic basket in a market, there are ways to recognize sweet, tasty strawberries.

1. Look at the color. The color nearest to the stem will tell you more than anything. If the strawberries are red right up to the top, then those tend to be ripe and delicious.

2. Look at the stem. If the stem and leaves are dried out, then that strawberry has been sitting in a truck or on a shelf for a long time and is probably past its prime.

3. Look at the bottom. If you're buying a container of strawberries, look at the container from the bottom. Make sure the berries on the bottom are red and they aren't leaking or molding.

4. Smell them. If they smell like strawberries, they're probably good.

When you're picking strawberries, you want sweet, juicy, tasty fruit.

The way we pick strawberries says something important.

When you're picking strawberries, you have a use planned for them. You may have a fruit salad or strawberry shortcake planned. You expect them to work for you.

Israel sometimes approached God in the same way. They expected God to do certain things for them. And if God didn't check all the boxes on their list, they added gods to their lives.

We can be the same way. We have expectations of life and of God. And while we may not always consciously think of it in these terms, if God doesn't fulfill every one of our expectations, we may turn to other gods as well. We rarely think of the things we turn to as "gods," but when you understand what an idol truly is, I think you'll see that we turn to them surprisingly often.

THE ISRAELITES PICKED GODS THE WAY WE PICK FRUIT.

The Israelites' world turned upside down. Again.

When we get to Judges chapter 6, the Israelites again did things that the Lord called evil.

We know what that means. They started worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, the people who lived in the Promised Land before the Israelites. When they started worshipping the Canaanite gods, they started to think and act like Canaanites.

Consequently, God turned them over to their enemies.

This time, they were oppressed by the Midianites.

The Midianites came from the edge of the Arabian desert south and east of Israel.

The Midianites and the Israelites were distant, distant cousins.

However, by this point in history, they had been enemies for years.

During this period, the Midianites had begun to prosper. Their population exploded.

The arid lands in and near the Arabian desert couldn't sustain their increased population, so they exploded out of their homeland and began raiding the lands around them.

Judges 6 says that when they came into Israel, they were like a horde of locusts. They would camp in the valleys and pasture their animals. They would send out raiding parties to take anything of value they could find, including food, possessions, and animals.

The Midianites had learned how to use camels in battle, so they moved quickly and flexibly.

They absolutely devastated Israel. The Israelites were constantly on the watch for their raids. They would try to hide in caves and holes in the hills. They would try to fight. However, the Midianites overwhelmed them. Many people died.

After seven years of utter desperation, the Israelites cried out to the Lord.

God sent a prophet to them.

The prophet reminded the people that God had been faithful. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and from every one of their enemies. He gave them the Promised Land and had been their God.

However, the people had not been faithful to God. They disobeyed his every command.

You might expect God to follow that message with a decision to abandon the people.

Instead, his message of disappointment was still a prelude to saving his people anyway.

Then God called Gideon.

The angel of the Lord appeared again in the book of Judges.

Gideon was working nearby when the angel appeared. He was hidden down in a winepress where he could not be seen by Midianite raiding parties. He was processing wheat.

The angel told Gideon that the Lord was with him and saluted him as a mighty warrior.

Gideon didn't recognize his visitor as an angel at first. Instead, Gideon complained about the Midianites and about the fact that the Lord seemed to have abandoned them.

The angel told Gideon to go and save Israel from the Midianites.

Of course, Gideon protested. He claimed that he was the weakest member of the weakest clan in his tribe, Manasseh.

The angel countered that the Lord would be with him and that he would defeat Midian.

This is when Gideon began to take the angel seriously. He asked the angel to stay to receive an offering. Gideon went and prepared a young goat, unleavened bread, and broth. He brought the back to the angel who instructed him to put the offering on a rock. Then the angel touched the offering with his staff, the offering was consumed by fire, and the angel disappeared.

Gideon finally understood that he had seen the Lord. He built an altar on the spot.

He also understood that the Lord had indeed called him to lead Israel against the Midianites.

However, before Gideon started work, God had one more task for him to do in Judges 6:25-26.

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

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."

RECOGNIZE THE IDOLS ALL AROUND YOU.

It may surprise you to learn that Gideon had pagan idols in his backyard.

The idols seem to have belonged to Gideon's father, Joash. Rather than being an insignificant person in a weak clan, Gideon was the son of an important man in their clan. Joash seems to have been the one who built the local shrine to the clan's gods.

Joash had an altar to the Canaanite god, Baal. Baal was one of the chief gods in the Canaanite pantheon. He was the god of thunderstorms and a giver of fertility.

Joash also had something called an Asherah pole. Asherah poles were the trunks of trees that were carved to resemble the exaggerated characteristics of the Canaanite's fertility goddess.

During this period, many Israelites worshipped Baal and Asherah.

By and large, they didn't forget about the Lord. They continued to worship the Lord in some ways and remember what the Lord had done for them in years gone by.

They just added other gods alongside the Lord.

Like Gideon, we are all surrounded by gods.

Of course, today there are people who consciously and specifically worship gods who are not the Lord. Those gods have many, many names.

However, gods and idols take many forms.

Certainly, statues that represent specific gods are idols.

We also call people we greatly admire "idols." We honor them and seek to emulate them.

Anything that is an object of worship, desire, or ultimate loyalty can become a god to us.

By that definition, there are "gods" and "idols" all around us, competing with the only true God for our loyalty.

Recognize the idols all around you.

Probably you don't live your life each day thinking about your own idols.

You may have very little awareness of the fact that your world is populated with idols.

So here are Four Questions to Help You Identify Your Idols:

1. What do you want more than anything else? If you want something badly enough, then it probably has control of your life and has claimed your loyalty. Things like possessions and security tend to fall into this category and have a way of taking over our lives.
2. What gets too much time, energy, focus, and money? This question is asking about what's out of bounds in your life. Things like work and play tend to go here. They start out as good things in our lives, and they can remain good things if they stay in right boundaries, but they become idols when they start to take too much from us.
3. What holds you and won't let you go? These are our addictions. We recognize that they're bad, and we want to be free from them, but we've already given them control over us.

4. What do you do when you are stressed? We have things we tend to do when we're stressed. We do those things because they comfort us. Consequently, we're getting comfort from those things, instead of getting our comfort from God.

That's why I've started to look at honey-wheat pretzel braids in a new way. I've started stress eating in the past two years. There are plenty of days when I end up on the couch in front of the television with a barrel of honey-wheat pretzel braids in my lap. I do it to unwind and make myself feel better when I'm stressed, so pretzels have become a potential idol in my life.

Recognize the idols all around you.

Gideon's initial reaction to the angel shows us how his family became embroiled in idolatry.

When the angel of the Lord greeted him, the angel said that the Lord was with Gideon.

Gideon replied with a very pointed question. If the Lord was with him or with anyone, then why had the Midianites become such oppressors and why had the people suffered so?

Gideon knew that the Lord had saved Israel repeatedly in years gone by.

However, he felt that the Lord had now abandoned his people.

Therefore, they needed to go shopping for new gods who would protect Israel from Midian.

That's what Gideon thought gods did; they made life work. We can be like Gideon in that.

We're looking for gods who behave like Marvel's Avengers.

Marvel's comic books and movies feature heroes who wrestle with villains who seek to get wealth and power from the rest of us.

Some of these characters are enhanced by serums that make them super strong.

Other characters have been bombarded with radiation that changed them into something other than what they were before.

Some characters were born with unique abilities or learned unprecedented knowledge or came to possess astounding pieces of technology.

In comic books and movies, we expect superheroes to save the day when the world needs to be saved. That way of thinking shows us how we end up with gods and idols. However...

Truth: We don't pick gods who work for us.

A god who is supposed to work for us isn't a god after all.

And if we get to pick and choose our gods, then those aren't gods either.

God who is real makes the rules, and God who is real demands to be our only god.

REPENT OF YOUR IDOLS.

In Judges 6:27, Gideon destroyed the pagan idols and replaced them with an altar to the Lord.

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.

God spoke to Gideon at night, and that very night, Gideon obeyed.

Gideon took a pair of bulls and ten of his male servants.

Together, they went to the altar of Baal and broke it down.

Then Gideon cut down the Asherah pole and chopped it into firewood.

Next, Gideon constructed a proper altar to the Lord.

He slaughtered one of the bulls and put it on the altar. Then he took the wood from the Asherah pole and built a fire to burn the bull as an offering to the Lord.

He did it all at night because he knew that his family and the men from town would stop him if they knew what he was doing.

When the men of his town discovered what had happened, they came to punish Gideon.

It's important to note here that the men of the town where Gideon lived were Israelites. They were so strong in their devotion to Baal and Asherah that they were furious when they discovered what had been done to the place of worship.

They launched an investigation and discovered that Gideon had desecrated their shrine.

They went to Joash, Gideon's father. They demanded that Joash turn over Gideon. They planned to kill Gideon to atone for the guilt that he had brought on them that they feared would lead to the wrath of Baal and Asherah.

However, Gideon's father, Joash, stood up to the men of their town.

Joash asked the men of the town why they felt like they needed to fight Baal's battles or save him. After all, Baal was supposed to be powerful. They were following Baal because he was supposed to be saving them from the Midianites.

So Joash told the men of the town to let Baal fight his own battles. If someone needed to punish Gideon, then Baal could do it himself.

Gideon's actions show us what to do: Repent of your idols.

It's not enough that we recognize our idols.

Tim Keller wisely adds that it's not enough that we regret our idols when we recognize that we have them in our lives. Repenting is the only course of action that makes sense.

To repent of our idols implies a three-step process in our lives.

First, we stop what we're doing. If we're going to repent of our idols, then we can't keep doing what we're doing. Don't rush past this step or sidestep it.

Second, we ask forgiveness. Asking forgiveness implies true sorrow that leads to new actions.

Third, we walk away. Repenting of our idols means that after we stop and ask forgiveness, we start living a new life that doesn't revolve around that old idol.

RETURN TO THE LORD.

Gideon's behavior shows us that he missed this important step.

Shortly after Gideon broke down his family's idols, the Midianites returned to Israelite territory.

Judges 6:34 says:

But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.

He called Israel to battle, fought valiantly, and was victorious.

However, Gideon never fully returned to the Lord.

Gideon showed a dark side toward the people of Israel.

We also learn that he was motivated by a desire for revenge for the killing of his older brothers.

What happened after the fighting shows definitively that Gideon had not returned to the Lord.

He took a large quantity of gold and made something called an ephod out of it.

An ephod is a garment. In the Old Testament it's a garment worn by the high priest.

In Judges 8 we learn that the ephod became an object the people of Israel inappropriately worshipped and a "snare" for Gideon and his family. The terms used usually apply to idols.

In the ancient Near East, it was customary in the cult of Baal and some other gods to create a plain idol statue. Then worshippers would clothe that statue in robes made of gold and precious materials to honor that god. Then they would worship the god clothed in splendor.

Is this what Gideon did? Did Gideon himself turn back to the worship of Baal?

Or did Gideon just worship the Lord in a way that felt like the worship of the pagan gods?

In either case, Gideon clearly did not return to the Lord the way God demanded.

As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned right back to the worship of Baal. Gideon's own family was consumed violently. The world was clearly upside-down.

Like Gideon and the Israelites, when we follow false gods, our world usually turns upside-down.

False gods aren't real.

Consequently, when we follow false gods, what really happens is that we take charge of our lives. Our wants and needs take center stage.

Since we are sinful and broken to begin with, when we are at the center of our lives, everything around us tends to become sinful and broken like us.

Eventually our lives don't work. They fall apart. Our world turns upside-down.

What, then, is the truth?

Truth: We don't pick gods who work for us; we belong to the Lord who is the only true God.

Yes, let's recognize that there are false gods all around us, begging us to pick them.

Let's also repent of our idolatry that makes us work for gods we thought would work for us.

Let's remember that the Lord is the only true God and that we belong to him.

The grace covering this entire episode demonstrates that the Lord is not just another god.

The Lord delivered Israel from the Midianites even though they never really repented. They never changed their actions, nor did they change their fundamental loyalty. That's grace.

The Lord chose to use Gideon even though he was an idol worshipper. God used idol worshippers before and would do so again, but that is still amazing grace.

The Lord used Gideon even though he never fully belonged to the Lord; the best he ever did was to belong partially to God. For the Lord to use him anyway is astounding grace.

There is no god whose mercy and grace compares with the grace of the Lord.

That kind of grace is exactly what we see in Jesus.

Jesus took on human flesh when we had done nothing to deserve his intervention to save us.
Jesus took on the weight of sin that we could not bear ourselves.
Jesus died in our place when we were the ones who had sinned and earned punishment.
Jesus gained our forgiveness when we had not yet repented.
That's what divinity looks like.

Let's Return to the Lord.

Romans 10:9 puts the call so elegantly:

... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

To believe means to have trusting faith that turns into action.

To return to the Lord means to have trusting faith in Jesus that turns into action.

Put your belief in Jesus and put him in charge of your life.

If you're a follower of Jesus who has allowed idols into your life, then it's time to recognize the idols all around you, repent of your idols, and return to the Lord finally and forever.

If you have never accepted Jesus as your Savior and begun to follow him, today is the day. Admit that you have had other gods in your life. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died to pay the price for your sin and that the Lord is the only true God. Choose to follow Jesus for the rest of your life.