

Fighting Temptation: God Breaks the Cycle of Sin!

A sermon based on Judges 10:6-16 – ***“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, ⁷ he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸ who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹ The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. ¹⁰ Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”***

¹¹ The Lord replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”

¹⁵ But the Israelites said to the Lord, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” ¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer. ‘

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Again!” If you’ve seen the movie “Miracle,” you might remember the scene where famed coach Herb Brooks, of the 1980 US men’s Olympic hockey team...yes, the team known for the “Miracle on Ice” game, where Team U.S., a team filled with some of college’s top players, as massive underdogs shocked the older, stronger, more talented, more experienced, more disciplined USSR powerhouse by beating them 4-3. Do any of you remember watching that on TV?

Anyways, in the scene in the movie, the U.S. team had just finished an exhibition game against the lowly Norwegian squad with an embarrassing tie. Coach Brooks decided they needed a lesson...and a little bit of extra practice. So, he called the players, understandably worn out after the long match, back to the ice for a little more practice, to skate back and forths the length of the ice. And this continued for some time, to the point where guys were puking; they even shut the lights off in the rink. But over and over, Coach Brooks would shout, “Again,” the whistle would blow, and they’d be off again. It went on for probably well over an hour and didn’t stop until one player, I’m guessing on the brink of passing out, figured out and shared the lesson...it didn’t matter where they came from, where they played college hockey, or how great they thought they were. They were part of a team...team USA, and it was time to start acting like it.

Again! Maybe you’ve felt frustration similar to Coach Brooks. After telling your child three or four times to go and do their homework or pick up their toys, this time you say, “I’m not going to tell you again. If you don’t do this, you’re grounded.” Your spouse forgets to pay the bill on time and you get the

notification of the late fee and, temper boiling, you yell, “Again?!? You did this last month, too.” Maybe it’s the friend calling you for a ride because their car broke down – it seems like a monthly occurrence – and, slightly irritated, you sigh, “Ugh, not again!” And all of those cause you to wonder, “When will they learn?”

Do you think God maybe wondered the same thing in our section of Judges this morning? Look at how our verses begin, **“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.”** There’s that word, “again.” And maybe you’re not surprised to see that there. Do you know how the book of Judges is laid out?

Go to the beginning of the book, and you start to understand. When God gave the Israelites the Promised Land, his one command was, “Drive out all the other peoples and nations who are living there. And yet, verses like Judges 1:19 state, **“They were unable to drive (whatever nation it was) out.”** They didn’t get rid of the heathens living among them, as God had asked them to, so as a result, God said, **“I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you” (Judges 2:3).**

And they were. Over and over again, throughout the book of Judges, the Israelites fell into this repulsive cycle, which is characterized by this passage, which conveniently serves as the theme of the book, **“everyone did as they saw fit.”** The people went their own way, turned their noses up against God, sinned (usually through their idolatry), and God punished them by unleashing on them one of those nations they failed to drive out...and these nations would crush them.

And so, as the cycle turned, the people, beaten down, cried to God for his mercy and help, and here was God’s reaction every time, **“The LORD raised up a judge for them (men like Samson, Gideon), he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (Judges 2:18,19).**

And so it went, again and again. And here was no different...actually it was worse. Look at the list of the gods they worshiped and serve. Baal and the Ashtoreths, you might recognize those idols; they were always part of the mix. But of the five other national deities named here, four of those were nations who had previously oppressed the Israelites...nations from whom the Lord delivered his people through a judge.

Do you understand what was happening? Though defeated, these heathen nations were snatching victory from defeat through their pagan superstitions which were taking root in the Israelites’ lives. With each cycle of rebellion against God and God’s deliverance, Israel grew weaker rather than stronger. Instead of standing more firm against temptation, they caved in even more willingly, really sticking it to God by crawling back into bed with the gods of the very nations he had just rescued them from. How disgusting!

Has that same, repulsive, disgusting cycle found its way into your own life? From time to time we talk about pet sins. Do you understand what those are? That’s a sin that, try as hard as you might avoid and fight when you feel it tempting you, you still run back to time after time. Like, if you have a problem with your language, where there are some four letter words or curse words that have become a

somewhat normal part of your language repertoire, maybe you know how hard it is to stop using them. Maybe you've even reasoned to yourself, "Well, people know that's just the way I talk sometimes."

Or, maybe it's this nasty streak that you have from time to time, where you'll just yell and scream at people over the smallest things, your anger flares up if you're inconvenienced a little bit, it seems like everything and everyone annoys you. And, everyone avoids you or knows to handle you with kid gloves so as not to set you off.

And it gets to be a cycle, doesn't it? We sin. And maybe, often, things get difficult. We feel bad or beaten down and plead to God for his mercy. God is merciful and things get better...at least for a little while. But then, we fall right back into the same sin again. Things become more difficult. We plead for mercy. God is merciful and things get better. And so it goes. You're seeing the cycle, aren't you?

And it's not just your day to day life where it happens, but maybe it even happens here, in your church life.

I come to church, I'm moved by the gospel and all fired up, then on the drive home from church, a car cuts me off, or the kids are arguing, or I realize I left my wallet at home when grabbing groceries, and the anger comes back or the cussing flows like water out of my mouth.

Or, after confessing my sins here and receiving God's absolution, I'm ready to live for Jesus. Then, I go downstairs after worship, grab a cup of coffee, join a conversation where they're talking about so and so who wasn't in church today, "Well, did you hear about what so and so did," and you fall right back into your bad habit being part of the rumor mill. It's just so natural.

There was once a Bible class I led where we talked about how even the most evil people – our enemies - still need to hear the love of God from us, and right after the class, someone shared some devastating news of a terrible murder, and one of the people, who had just gone through that class said, "You'd know what I do with that person." And I said, "But we just talked about this."

I mean, how many of us have done that before? How hard is it to break this cycle of sin? It's almost like an addiction, isn't it? An alcoholic, a drug addict, someone addicted to sex or porn...they might not want to be that way, but they're stuck in this vicious cycle, where they're going to keep relapsing again and again, just like the Israelites and their idolatry.

And we've been there. Maybe some of you are still there, caught again in this scary, horrible cycle of sin...horrible because every sin is despicable and utterly repulsive to God, and scary because think of what even one sin can do to you and your eternity.

And God calls us today – and every day - to repent and break the cycle of sin. But on our own, it's impossible, isn't it?

Look at the Israelites here. In verse ten, after they were oppressed because of their idolatry, what did they cry out to God? ***"We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."*** Wasn't that repentance?

Israel appeared contrite. True contrition, however, is more than being sorry you got caught with your hand in the cookie jar. Five cycles of idolatry prior to this made it look like Israel valued the Lord only when all else failed.

And we know the Lord had certainly proved himself faithful again and again, raising up judges to save his people. But this is how they treated him over and over again? Their “Get out of Jail Free” card...their quick fix so they could fall right back into the cycle of sin. How was it possible for them to be so unfaithful, when history demonstrated over and over again that the Lord in mercy had rescued them in spite of their unfaithfulness? So, he basically told them, “Since I was not good enough for you, and history proves that you preferred other gods repeatedly, then go to them! Let them rescue you!”

And for falling back into the cycle of sin again and again, and refusing to get out of it, or even not being able to get out of it on our own, we deserve that same kind of reaction from God, to neglect our cries for help, both in this life and in the life to come.

But, how do our verses today end? The Israelites got rid of their idols, served God, and cried out to him in true repentance, and we read how, again, **“the [LORD] could bear their misery no longer.”** And so, again, he acted on their behalf, raised up another judge, Jephthah, who saved them from their enemies.

Friends, God deals with us even more lovingly. He graciously acts on our behalf even before we get rid of the gods/sins in our lives.

God’s Word is the good news of how God broke that most dangerous cycle of sin in our lives. He sent Jesus. And every part of Jesus’ work here broke cycles that had become the unfortunate norm in all of our lives. Like, with his life, Jesus broke the cycle of generations and generations of people who weren’t able to be perfect as God demands. Even with the intense attacks and temptations of Satan and his followers, Jesus said “no” to every temptation and lived a holy life for us.

On the cross, Jesus broke the cycle of selfish living that every one of us is born with a natural disposition towards with his selfless sacrifice...giving his life of perfection to us while taking our disgusting sins for himself, and that includes the repulsive cycles of the same sins we fall into again and again. He took those away.

And finally, Jesus broke the cycle of death winning every battle and holding every person captive when he busted the chains of death and rose from the grave on Easter Sunday, guaranteeing our victory over death...how it’ll end for us in a glorious reunion with Jesus and all the saints of God in heaven.

It seems like foolishness, doesn’t it, that God would go through all that and give up something so valuable to him for us – to forgive us- even when he know we’ll end up falling into sin again. But he did because he loves us – foolish or not.

But he hasn’t done that so we can casually and indifferently fall right back into the cycle of sin...those destruction patterns in our lives. No, listen to what God’s Word says, **“Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14,15).**

No, Christ loved and lived and died and rose for you and me so that we might break the cycle of sin in our lives. That’s what our lives now as forgiven children of God – it’s called sanctification – is all about...living in love and thankfulness for Jesus. And when it comes to the cycle of sin, what can we do? How about a new cycle?

- **Repent**...the heartfelt guilt we feel as we confess our sins to Jesus.
- **Trust**...in the complete and gracious forgiveness God gifts us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
- **And live**...with Christ's salvation and deliverance working in us a growing appreciation of and desire to obey all God's commandments.

This is a much tougher cycle than the cycle of sin...because we can't do all that perfectly. We won't be able to do all that perfectly on this side of eternity. But again and again, God is there. Again and again, God forgives when we repent. Again and again, God will motivate us with his love. And again and again, God will work through us to show him the love he desires and deserves.

Again! Friends, again you have endless opportunities to approach God's throne bearing your sins. Again, you have endless opportunities to live in thanks to Jesus. But now, we aren't discouraged. We aren't frustrated. We rejoice in his victory...again and again. And that's a cycle worth continuing! Amen.

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