
The Idolatry of Work

1. Animal Farm

- I remember reading at high school the George Orwell book *Animal Farm*
- And I found it quite confronting and revealing
 - Story about a farm yard of animals who start off with intentions of a creating a community of equals, sharing produce and living a better life
 - They adopt Seven Commandments of Animalism, the most important of which is, "All animals are equal."
 - However as the story unfolds, the pigs begin to adopt more and more control
 - Manipulating and working the other animals to for their own purposes
 - In the end the The Seven Commandments are abridged to a single phrase: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others"
- As an allegory it is quite profound
 - It reveals many truths about our human nature
 - One of which ... is our desire to seek our own interest
 - Even though all the animals began with the intention of serving one another and seeking the interest of the others ...
 - Eventually the corrupt nature got the better of them ... and the self-serving intentions brought chaos, disunity and pain to the farm yard
- Friends ... what's so brilliant about Animal Farm is that it exposes such deep truths about us as a humanity
 - That even though we might have good intentions to do good for others and serve others and want to ensure everyone is treated equally
 - Our human nature is to look after our own interests ... and serve the interests of our own hearts ... rather than the interests of others
- So as we continue our series on work ... I want us to explore why this is the case and how it impacts us in our work
- That is ... to see why we use work to serve ourselves rather than others
- Three things today
 - Presence of idols > our heart condition that drives us to self-interest
 - Problem of idols > the consequences of being selfish
 - Purging of idols > how can we change our hearts in order to serve others as we should

2. Presence of Idols

- One of the reasons work is both fruitless and frustrating is because of the powerful desire of the heart to make work the main basis of our meaning and identity in life
 - When this happens we no longer work in order to create communities that love and serve God and love and serve one another
 - We no longer work to build communities according to God's good plan
 - But we're working to serve our own interests rather than the interests of our community
 - Because of our selfishness ... work becomes a way to put myself above my neighbour and above others in my community

- In Genesis chapter 11 we have the famous story of the building of the tower of Babel
- The people of the day decide to begin the biggest construction project in the history of the world ...
 - They decide they're going to build a tower / city up to heaven
 - This is like Bangaroo on steroids
 - Heaps of construction ... loads of committees, industrial disputes ... massive infrastructure ... it's all happening

- **Illustration – Dubai Tower**
- This is an **audacious** plan
- The world's tallest tower is in Dubai ... its 163 floors / 830m high
- Just to give you some perspective ... that's almost double the height of the Empire State Building!
- So the world's tallest tower ... a massive, unbelievable construction in many ways ... is 800m high
- Yet here mankind wants to build a city & tower that reaches to the heavens!?

- It really is a plan of great arrogance and pride
- And their arrogance and pride is even more apparent when we see the reason for them wanting to build such a city and tower
- Have a look at v4
 - *"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*

- What's driving them to build the tower?

- There's two reasons ...
 - Make a name for themselves
 - Not be scattered
- They want glory and security
- Glory ...
 - *Let **us** build ourselves ... so that **we** may make a name for **ourselves***
 - They're only concerned with their own reputation
- For the people of Shinar
 - It's all about **their** plans, **their** name, **their** glory

- They're not working for the sake of others and the community
- They're working to fulfill their own desires and wants

- The second reason for wanting to build the tower was so that they would *'not be scattered over the face of the earth'*
 - In other words ... they want security
 - If they're scattered ... then they're vulnerable
 - If they can build a city ... then they'll feel safe

- And so ... their work is motivated by significance and safety ... for glory and security

- Earlier this year we looked at the nature of idolatry
 - We make an idol of something when we take anything in creation and begin to 'bow down' to it
 - That is – to love, serve, and derive meaning from something more than God
- Now it's our hearts that love things ...
 - Which means we can set up idols in our hearts ... things that our hearts desire
 - In fact, John Calvin said that our human nature is so broken that – *"Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols"*
 - That is, our hearts are constantly loving and desiring things other than God
- Often the things we desire after and idolise are good things
 - But we turn those good things into ultimate things
 - That is ...
 - without this thing my life has no meaning
 - without this thing I can't be happy
 - without this thing I'm dissatisfied

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- Good things like ... money, family, relationship, work, house, holidays
 - Tim Keller says that underneath each of those tangible things ... is a heart idol ... a desire of the heart we're seeking to fulfill
 - Typically those deep desires of the heart are:
 - Significance
 - Security
 - Power
 - Comfort
 - And rather than looking to God for our significance, security, power and comfort ... we look to satisfy those desires in other things
 - We looked to created things rather than the one who created them
 - And this is what the people of Shinar are doing
 - They're seeking to satisfy their heart idol of glory [Keller = significance] and security
 - How? By building a tower in order to make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the earth
 - **Application**
 - What's the motivation for many of today's workers?
 - For many ... its glory and security
 - For many, work becomes the vehicle to
 - bring glory to yourself
 - create security for yourself
 - So Instead of seeking to serve others in our work for the thriving and flourishing of the community ...
 - Work becomes selfish ... we work for ourselves
 - We work in order to satisfy the idols of our hearts
 - For some of us ... we will be like the people of Shinar
 - Our work is how to satisfy our hearts desire for glory
 - We want to make a name for ourselves > want people to remember us
 - We want others to recognise our achievements > congratulate us > be seen as indispensable to the team
 - And like the people of Shinar there will be some of us who work to satisfy our idol of security
 - Either having the job makes me secure; or
 - The money I earn makes me secure ... because I can
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- Buy house in the suburb where I feel safe
- Send my kids to the schools that I feel are safe
- Put away enough super so my future feels safe
- Now security and safety are **good** things ... but when we make them either of them **ultimate** things ... then we make an idol of it and we're serving ourselves ... not the community in which God has placed us and wants us to serve

3. Problem of Idols

- In v5 we see God comes down from the heaven's in judgment on the city
- And v5-7 are rather amusing and very ironic
 - Because in these verses we see just how insignificant in God's sight is this tower that mankind is attempting to build
- This tower ... that was going to bring glory and fame and renown to the name of mankind ...
 - is so small, puny and insignificant, that God has to come down from heaven to actually see it!!
 - This tower that was meant to reach all the way to heaven ... can't even be seen from heaven
 - So God comes down to see what's happening
- When God comes down he see mans wickedness and idolatry ...
 - He sees what they're up to and decides to act
- But notice the form that the judgment takes
 - Were this a Hollywood Blockbuster with special effects we might expect to see God send lightning and earthquakes and destroy the settlement with balls of fire from the sky
 - Instead he confuses their language and scatter them away from the city so they're no longer able to work together on the tower
 - And the people are worse off than when they started
- **Application**
- Here we see a principle that runs throughout the whole Bible and which we see each and every day
 - Human sinfulness has consequences
 - One of those is God's judgment
 - But the other is it undermines communities
 - It brings strife, disunity and disorder

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- And so our selfish and idolatry inevitably lead to a breakdown in community
 - This is especially true at work
 - Our desire for self-glory leads to
 - Promoting ourselves at the expense of our peers
 - Treating staff like resources to get what we want, rather than treating them as people
 - Making unethical decisions in order to get ahead or be profitable
 - Our over desire for security will cause us to
 - Hoard wealth and not be willing to be generous with our money
 - Ignore the plight of the poor or refugees
 - Do whatever the boss says in order to keep my job or get ahead
 - So when we have these heart idols of self-glory and security it makes it impossible to work in such a way that we're building communities that love and care for one another ... because we're always seeking our own interests first
 - And when we look at our society ... much of our problems stem from our own and other people's selfish desires
 - Workplace bullying > desire for power over others
 - Environmental disasters > companies selfish desires to exploit our natural resources
 - Dissent with boss > his desire to be profitable at the expense his workers family life

 - So how can move away from this ... towards communities that thrive and flourish?
 - The Bible tells us we need to put aside our idols of self-glory and security and instead work for the good of others in our community and culture

4. Purging of Idols

- **Esther**
- In the Bible there are lots of great examples of people who even though they have positions of power and influence ... they work ...
 - Not for their own glory and security
 - But who work for the good of others in their community and culture

- In the OT book of Esther ... we get a great example of someone who puts aside self-glory and security ... for the sake of others
- Esther is a Jew living in Persia under King Xerxes ... who notices Esther and her beauty and takes her to be his Queen

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- Not long after one of the king's officials called Haman convinces the king that the Jews are a danger to the Persian Empire and convinces Xerxes to issue an edict that all Jews throughout the empire ought to be killed and their property plundered
 - Esther's relative - Mordecai, a Jewish leader, contacts Esther in the palace and tells her she must use her place in the palace to avert this danger
 - This is a huge request of Esther because Esther is a believer in God whose place of power in the is tenuous because no one knows she's a Jew
 - And here she is being called to use her position serve the good of her fellow countrymen
 - Mordecai says in v14 *"who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this"*
 - Mordecai was asking Esther to take an enormous risk to do this
 - In that time and place to fall out of favour with the king didn't just mean losing your job ... it more often meant losing your life
 - Esther said to Mordecai that it was
 - "a capital offence for anyone to go to the king unless the King extends the golden scepter to them [and] ... 30 days have passed since I was called to the king" (v11)
 - Esther knows that to approach the king means risking not just her position in the palace but her very life
 - As you read the rest of Esther 5-8 we see Esther does just that and saves her people
 - She was willing to put aside her own glory and security in order to serve and save others
 - She was willing to risk her life and lose her place in the palace for the sake of others
 - **Application**
 - The Book of Esther parallels the biblical accounts and Daniel and Joseph
 - All three of them were believers
 - Each was an official in a non-believing government and culture that was opposed to God
 - None of them were prophets, priests, elders or teachers
 - Yet they had reached the highest circles of power in their secular institutions and God used them mightily
 - There are numerous lessons here for us
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- Firstly ... don't just get into the palace of whatever work you do ... and make life as comfortable and secure for yourself as possible
 - Serve!
 - 'You have come to your royal position for such a time as this.'
 - God urges you to think about where you are and why you are there
 - To realise the importance of being in the 'palace' and how you can serve the people and the community God has put you in
 - **Illustration - Teaching**
 - Many of you are teachers
 - It's as you teach you have the wonderful privilege and opportunity to shape the lives of young people in our community
 - And as you engage with the students at school ... you establish relationships with them
 - And it's in those relationships that real character shaping can take place
 - Because teaching is not just about imparting knowledge to kids to enable them to pass exams
 - It's not just **what** you teach them ... it's **how** you teach them this is just as / if not more important
 - It's the example you set as you model Christ-likeness to them in
 - Fairness
 - Humility
 - Gentleness
 - Showing grace
 - Because I'm sure you know ... this is where you'll have the greatest impact on shaping the hearts and the lives of the students you teach
 - Very few students look back on their school days and remember how well a teacher taught them algebraic equations, chemical compounds, how to write an essay, or play a G major scale
 - What they will remember ... are those teachers
 - who taught them about life
 - who were great role models for them
 - who took an interest in them personally, not just academically
 - who prayed with them during tough times
 - who modeled Christ-likeness in such a compelling way it made them realise that Jesus is real and that he's worth taking seriously
 - Those are the things that will leave the greatest legacy in a student's life
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- Who knows ... maybe *'You have come to your royal position for such a time as this.'*
 - Friends ... what are the ways you have opportunity to serve the community in your work so it thrives and flourishes?
 - Paid or unpaid
 - Home or workplace
 - Community or church
 - How can you put aside your self-glory and security in order to do what's best for the work God has given you to do? [repeat]
 - Now friends, when I hear the story of Esther ... I get inspired
 - I love how she was willing risk her life and lose her place in the palace in order to serve others
 - But there's a danger that we might look at the story of Esther and merely be inspired by her example to serve others rather than ourselves
 - The danger is ... Esther's example is not enough
 - Because our motivation won't last
 - After a while it'll wear because working to serve others is hard!
 - Friends ... there's a better way to work that will empower you to serve in the palace that God has placed you
 - We ought not to look to Esther as an example ... rather we ought to look to Esther as a sign post or a pointer to an even greater Esther
 - You see Esther points us to one who is like her ... but greater ... the Lord Jesus Christ
 - Jesus Christ is the one who
 - lived in the ultimate palace
 - with the ultimate beauty and
 - held the ultimate glory
 - And yet he voluntarily left all that behind
 - In Philippians chapter 2 we read that Jesus
 - had equality with the Father but he didn't hold on to it
 - he willingly came to earth as a **servant**
 - humbled himself to death, even death on a cross
 - Jesus wasn't just willing to risk his position in the palace ... he left his place in the palace and came to earth
 - He didn't do it at the **risk** of his own life ... but at the **cost** of his life
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- He didn't say
 - **if I perish**, I'll perish but
 - **when I perish**, I'll perish
 - He went to the cross and died
 - He made atonement for
 - all our idolatry ...
 - all the times we loved and worshipped created things rather than the creator
 - all the times our hearts loved other things, other than God
 - He put aside his self-glory and security to come and serve you and me
 - And by giving up his glory and security ...
 - He's guaranteed your glory and security for eternity
 - It's all done ... because he was willing to put aside self gain ... to serve us for our gain
 - You see ... like the people at Shinar ... you'll never be able to create your own glory and security
 - It's a futile project that you'll never fulfill
 - But there's a glory and security you can have that is far more glorious and far more secure than anything you and I could ever achieve ... and it's found in Jesus
 - You see friends ...
 - if you see Esther not as an example but is a pointer to Jesus and
 - if you see Jesus not as an example but as a saviour ... doing this thing for you personally, then you'll be able to see how valuable you are to him
 - If you see what Jesus Christ has done for you ... losing the ultimate palace for you ...
 - then you'll be able to start to serve God and your neighbour from that place in the palace where you are
 - you'll be willing to put aside self-glory and security ... in order to serve the community in your work so it thrives and flourishes?
 - It is interesting in the Book of Esther that Esther is called Queen Esther 14 times ...
 - 13 times that happened after she says 'if I perish I perish'
 - She becomes of person of greatness
 - not by trying to make a name for herself ...
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- but by being willing to put aside her glory and her security in order to serve others
- And you'll become a person of greatness
 - not trying to make a name for yourself or seeking your own security ..
 - but by serving the one who didn't come to be served ... but to serve ... and give his life as ransom for many
- Friends ... in your work
 - Put aside the idols of your heart that lead you to serve yourself
 - Rather see how Christ give up his place in the palace to serve you ... so that you may use your place in the palace to serve others

PRAY