

FINDING THE RIVER THAT
NEVER RUNS DRY

Part 2 of 4: *REPENTENCE - HOW TO STOP DIGGING BROKEN
CISTERNS*

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Resources For Christ-Centered Discipleship

Jeremiah 2:12-13 *Be 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.*

A Pastor that I know told about a 16-year-old in one of the churches he had served. Her name was Debbie and she was about 5'10" and less than 100 lbs. She was deeply upset because she wasn't popular. My friend was trying to encourage her, being very gentle and not just throwing pat answers at her. He took time with her and was trying to help her see all that Christ is and can be for people who believe in Him. She clearly professed faith in Christ as her Savior and Lord so he tried to point out all the great things that she had in and through Christ. This list included forgiveness, eternal life, the fact that she belonged to God, the fact that she had a Father in heaven, the fact that God who knew her, cared for her, loved her, gave her guidance and protection, gave her great promises for this life, and also for all of eternity in which she would rule and reign with Christ. He talked to her about all these things and at one point she looked at him and said, "Well, yeah, but what good is all that if you're not popular?"

This pastor commented on that and said, "You know, she'll probably learn that you don't say that kind of thing to your pastor, but the truth is there are probably a lot of people that feel like that." The problem is many people won't admit it, not even to themselves.

The Bible tells us that God is satisfying. He is able to meet our deepest needs. It also tells us that we often fail to experience the satisfaction that God alone can give us because our hearts are so obsessed with or focused on other things. These other things that we think we need to be happy or fulfilled are the broken cisterns God spoke about when he said, *"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.* Jeremiah 2:13

How do we stop digging broken cisterns and learn to live out of the fullness of God? One thing that will help us to stop digging broken cisterns is to see them from God's perspective, and in relationship to God. The last sermon in this series taught us that in relationship to us, these broken cisterns are unsatisfying. In relationship to God two very strong words are used: idolatry and adultery.

The Bible tells us that...

Digging broken cisterns is idolatrous

The first commandment is found in Exodus 20:2-3, It says; *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me.*

It would be easy to think of false gods or idols as something that only relates to the ancient world, but even in Bible times the Scriptures tell us that idolatry is something that can be inward, in the heart. Ezekiel 14:4-6 says, *"...These men have set up idols in their hearts...."*

The New Testament helps us to connect the dots.

Ephesians 5:5 *For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person--such a man is an idolater--has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

Colossians 3:5 *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*

1 John 5:21 ...*"Keep yourselves from idols..."*

It's very important to see how up-to-date the issue of idolatry is for all of us.

"The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry. But let me focus the question through a particular verse in the New

Testament... *'Beloved, keep yourselves from idols'* (1 John 5-21). How does that command merit being the final word in a 105-verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus the Son of God? ... [Keeping oneself from idols sums up what vital fellowship with Jesus is.]...

- - David Powlinson, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

"[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor, the incontinent man of his lust, the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chief good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts ... All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like.... When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main 'idol'] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets, which bring supply... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort....

- - Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*

Whenever we chase after broken cisterns we are committing idolatry in our hearts. If we see it that way and call it by its proper name, it will help us to repent!

Digging broken cisterns is adulterous

"The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry.... [All-murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God--yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry. -- Tertullian, *On Idolatry* Chap 1.

The apostle James shows us the pathology of spiritual adultery and the response of God's jealousy in James 4:1-10.

James 4:1-10 *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us*

more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James makes four key points

1. If our desires are not submitted to God they will cause conflict and dissatisfaction.

James begins with two rhetorical questions in verse 1, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"* The answer is, yes they do.

Notice in verse 2 James says. *"You want something but don't get it (so) you kill and covet but you can not have what you want. (So) You quarrel and fight..."* If something gets in the way of your desires and goals you experience strife, conflict, and a loss of peace and satisfaction.

2. If our desires are not submitted to God they will undercut our prayer life.

The next thing James says is very powerful. You might expect him to say, "You poor troubled people, don't worry. It will all be all right, just pray." Instead, he says most of the time a person will not pray when peace is lost because of unfulfilled desires, and when they do pray God won't answer because the prayer on their lips is polluted by the adultery of the heart.

3. If our desires are not submitted to God we are committing spiritual adultery.

In the midst of all of these desires that are tearing us apart, what is really going on is spiritual adultery because the desires have taken the place of God! You are no longer putting God first; you no longer love God most.

James says in James 4:2-5, *You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?*

4. If our desires are not submitted to God, repentance is the only way to make them right.

James tells us what we need to do. He concludes with a call to repentance and a promise of Grace. He says in verses 6-10, *But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

What this means in practice is that intimacy with God requires you to deal decisively with anything that competes with God for your heart. Maybe it's a material possession. It might be the approval of people, the love of one particular person, or a specific change in your

circumstances. It may be something that is morally wrong or it may be something that, while legitimate, has become too important to you.

Your desire for that one thing has captured your attention and pushed out of the center your affections, the one who loved you and gave Himself for you on the cross, and the one who still loves you and longs for your love.

What you need to do is realize that God longs with a painful but perfect jealousy for first place in your life and your love. You need to pray and say; "Lord, I am sorry. This is wrong. I've been foolish, faithless, and ungrateful. I know that nothing can fulfill me the way your love can. I want you to have the central place in my life and my love. I want to have no other gods before you."

No one loves you like God Almighty loves you and no one ever will! No matter how unfaithful you have been toward Him all He wants and requires is for you to come back.

Verse 8 says, *"Come near to God and He will come near to you."* Verse 6;

"...He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

God uses very strong expressions in verse 4. Note them: "You adulterous people", "hatred toward God", and "enemy of God". These are strong expressions. The background for this is that God loves his people so much he uses the most committed, intimate, and emotional of all human relationships to picture his love for His people. God pictures Himself as a loving husband and his people as his bride, His wife.

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word. In this picture God is a strong, faithful, loving, gracious, and patient husband, but often God's people are like an unfaithful wife.

(Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea all speak about this....)

God moved his prophets to speak this way because he wants to move His people to consider deeply what their unfaithfulness does to God! Are our hearts so hard that we just don't care? God says that his love is so great that He calls his adulterous people to come back to Him. In coming back to Him they have to come clean about what they have done, and admit to their unfaithfulness. Jeremiah 3:12-13 *Go, proclaim this message toward the north: "Return, faithless Israel," declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever. ¹³ Only acknowledge your guilt-- you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,'" declares the LORD.*

In James, God says we are doing the same thing today. It is the same issue in every age.

Jesus said in Luke 16:13, *"No servant can serve two masters."*

In Galatians 1:10 Paul says, *If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.* There is the same principle with respect to the approval of people. You have to make a radical choice for Christ and be willing to give up the approval of people.

You know what many people try to do they try to say, "I'll love Christ, I'll love money, and I'll love the approval of people." Christ says it doesn't work that way. In life you will face choices

with situations where you will compromise your love for Him in order to get or keep what you think you need, your broken cisterns and idols. It can become so much a part of you that you hardly know how deep the river of compromise is running through the center of your soul.

We need to know where we really stand with God on these issues.

Recognition Precedes Repentance

"...That most basic question which God poses to each human heart: "has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight Questions ... bring some of people's idol systems to the surface. 'To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect [out of life]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?' These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors.

-- David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair"

Jack Miller was a pastor who had a profound influence on me. I only met him once, but I read many of his books. One of them, titled "Come Back Barbara", is the story of one of his daughters who lived a seriously and blatantly sinful life. This pastor's daughter ran off and became the girlfriend of a drug kingpin. She was running around in mink stoles and green jaguars and here are this Presbyterian pastor and his wife at home praying about it. The book is powerful because at a certain point Jack and his wife, Rose Marie, sat down and spent some time thinking about who they were in Jesus Christ and who Jesus was to them. It was then that they forgave their daughter Barbara for the incredible humiliation and embarrassment that she was causing them.

Jack Miller used to say one of the problems with the book was that people would come to him and say, "You know this is not a very helpful book to me because you say you saw how bitter and angry you were getting and you forgave your daughter. I'm having the same experience with my child, but I've tried and I cannot forgive my rebellious child for the incredible pain they have caused me. You must just be a more spiritual person than me." Jack explained they had missed the point. What Jack did that enabled him to forgive his daughter is he recognized that the reason he was bitter and angry was not just because she was doing bad things but because, even though Jack believed in Christ as his Savior, the way he measured himself and tried to measure up was by being a good father and pastor. His reputation had actually begun to function as an idol in his life.

His daughter's rebellion, which was understandably sad, had an effect way beyond sad, it ripped apart the real source of all of his satisfaction and security in life. He realized that in his mind he had been thinking, "You know I'm a pretty good person because I am a good father and pastor. I've raised my children well and look at how many of them have turned out great." When one of them turned out bad it tore apart what had become the source of his life and happiness. What he had to say in effect was "Lord, I see now that the reason I am so angry at Barbara is because my reputation as a father has become too important to me. It has become an idol in my life. I give that up, and I'm sorry. You are my only true source of life and righteousness." Only by reaffirming Christ as the source and center of his life was he able to truly forgive his daughter from the heart.

Parents in similar situations who read the book and tried to forgive but couldn't. They didn't understand that the key to the forgiveness was to repent of the idolatrous self righteousness that had been attacked by their child's rebellion, and then to find renewed peace in the righteousness of Christ so that they could forgive from the heart.

Spiritual idolatry and spiritual adultery enslave us. We can only break free to enjoy the life God wants for us as we recognize those idols, repent, and return to Christ.

What might there be in your life that inappropriately controls you because it functions as your righteousness, your means of measuring up in life?

1. Examine your emotions as indicators of deeper issues.

Negative emotions are trouble lights on the dashboard of the car of life. They are not the primary problem, but they indicate that there is a problem.

1.) If you are angry, ask yourself why you are so angry. When you examine yourself push past the answers that focus on outward circumstances and get at the deeper issue. If you're first answer is to say: "I'm angry because no one is paying attention to me", ask why do I need people to pay attention to me when I have Christ paying constant caring attention to me? Have I made the attention of people into a broken cistern so that I am forsaking the fountain of living water?

When you ask yourself why you are so angry you may get answers like: "I can't do anything right, no matter how hard I try it's never enough, I'm being treated unfairly." When you get those answers think about what that means and push deeper into your heart and belief system. "Do I believe I have to be able to 'get things right' or be 'treated fairly' in order to be satisfied and fulfilled in life?" "Do I believe that the presence of Christ, his love, perfection and promises are enough for me only when I also have these other things also? Or is he sufficient no matter what?" "Am I really saying in my heart, 'What good is all of that (Christ and all he means) if I don't also have all of this (the issues I'm upset about)?" Usually anger comes when we feel that someone or something is blocking something we need.

2.) If you are fearful, anxious, or worried ask yourself why you are so worried. Sure there is a natural concern about things and people that matter to us, but sinful worry comes when there is something we think we must have for life to work and we are afraid we aren't going to get it. When you examine your fears and worries push past the answers that focus on outward circumstances to get at the deeper issue. Ask yourself if you are really worried because something means too much to you. Have you allowed yourself to feel that you need it when you do not? As a Christian by definition, you have Christ and therefore you can be confident that whatever you are worried about you need not.

3.) If you are depressed ask yourself if you feel that you have already lost something or failed at something you think you must have. Look beneath the surface of the circumstances and let the emotion serve as a signpost to a deeper issue. God is your fountain that never runs dry. Whatever else you may have lost need never plunge you into despair if you have him. He is the fountain of living water and every other source of fulfillment is a broken cistern.

2. Examine your thoughts as indicators of deeper issues.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ¹³

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. Psalms 73:2& 13-15 (NIV)

Sometimes we listen to lies all day long in our minds. Monitor you inner thoughts. Are you thinking the truth or does your thinking reveal a nest of broken cisterns?

Listen for the “if only” lies.

“I would be happy if only....”

- * I could be secure
- * I could be popular
- * I could control the situation
- * I could find the right person to love me
- * I could make sure my kids turn out all right
- * I could be healthy
- * I could get ahead financially
- * I could undo what I did
- * I could please my dad
- * I could prove myself
- * I could change my life
- * I could fit in

Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living... When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen ... a god.... One has a god when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully.

-- Thomas C. Oden, Notes on the Death of Modernity, Chapter 6

Listen for where you're saying:

“What good is it....”?

- * To serve God if I'm still single
- * To follow Christ if i can't get a job
- * Live for Christ if my children don't turn out all right
- * To be a Christian if it doesn't save my marriage

3. Examine your temptations as indicators of deeper issues.

Temptations work like emotions to indicate deeper issues. Sin is bad fruit on the tree of your life. Learn to look for the roots that feed the bad fruit.

1 Timothy 6:10 says: *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.*

Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief's.

Notice that Timothy says the love of money is a root. What other false loves prove to be the root cause of bad fruit in life? In Luke 3:9 John the Baptist talked about laying the axe at the root of the tree. Ask God to help you identify when a sin in your life is related to a broken cistern in your heart.

An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as a substitute for God. All sorts of things are potential idols. An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, or a hero. If this is so, how do we determine when something is an idol? As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol.

--Work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one's family are ignored.

--Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside one's own family is cared for.

--Being well liked, a legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means one never risks disapproval.

-- Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory" in No God but God

CONCLUSION

Scripture encourages us to examine our lives and to ask God to help us understand our hearts. Psalm 139:2-24 says, *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* The purpose of understanding your heart is to turn your heart to God and his ways. That is where we find the fountain of living water that never runs dry.

Back in the twelfth century, a Monk named Bernard of Clairvoix wrote a hymn titled: "Jesus Thou Joy Of Loving Hearts". It is an amazing hymn that has lasted for 8 centuries, and one of the verses in this Hymn does a good job of summing up this evening's message.

Jesus thou Joy of loving hearts,
True source of life and light of men
From the best bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to thee again

Note: Many of the quotes in this message are taken from Dr. Tim Keller's unpublished class notes for the course, Preaching The Gospel In A Post-Modern World.