



JUNK DRAWER JESUS



A Five Week Sermon Series



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The Scale

Introduction

We all have a junk drawer, don't we? That one spot in the house for all the odds and ends that don't seem to have a place. Batteries, bottle openers, rubber bands, and maybe four or five old phone chargers. You know the drill. You try to open it, but it gets stuck because there's an old pair of earbuds tangled up with some pencils and a swimming medal from who-knows-when. It's full of stuff you've gathered over the years. You know you don't need it, but you just can't bring yourself to throw it away. You might need it, right?

Well, we all have something like that in our spiritual lives too—a spiritual junk drawer, so to speak. It's filled with a mix of spiritual stuff we've collected over the years and labeled as “religion.”

Maybe it's an old saying from your Grandma: “God helps those who help themselves...” sitting next to some truth about the Trinity you learned in Sunday school. Or there's that philosophical idea you picked up in an undergrad class, tangled up with a quote you screenshotted from Instagram.

These things make up your spiritual reality. But the truth is, most of it—maybe much of it—is junk. This stuff weighs us down and makes faith a confusing, frustrating, and burdensome thing.

I'd argue that when someone feels tempted to reject or deconstruct their faith, what they're actually wanting to let go of isn't Jesus, but all the junk they've been carrying around. It's all the stuff that clouds the message and clutters the heart. Stuff we hold on to for no rhyme or reason, other than "we might need it someday."

In this series, we've been taking out some items from our spiritual junk drawer, examining them, and deciding what to keep and what to let go. We're comparing the junk we carry—the stuff we call religion—to Christ. We're holding on to what points us to Him and letting go of what clouds our view.

Today, let's do some spiritual spring cleaning and make space for the true message of grace.

The Scale

In most spiritual junk drawers, if you rummage around, you'll probably find a scale. Not the kind you weigh yourself on, but maybe the kind you'd use to measure out the perfect amount of coffee beans.

I used to be a bit of a coffee snob. I was a pour-over coffee guy. And it required me to measure out exactly 29 grams of beans onto a little scale. It would take me 20 minutes just to make one cup of coffee. Eventually, I gave up. It was too much of a grind—pun intended.

But that little scale represents a belief that many of us carry around, often without even realizing it: the belief that the universe—or God—is measuring our actions, weighing the good and the bad, and in the end, we just need to do more good than bad to tip the scales in our favor.

You even see hints of this in the Old Testament. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, lets some of this slip when he says: "So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them." —Ecclesiastes 9:1

This idea of a cosmic scale—where our deeds are weighed—sneaks into most of our spiritualities. It's the belief that we have to try to tip the scales in our favor, and hopefully, we'll do enough good to outweigh the bad.

Shaped by the Scale

This notion of a cosmic scale is deeply embedded in our hearts, and it shapes how we live our everyday lives.

Let's take a quick inventory. Say you go out and party one weekend and maybe hit it a little too hard. The next weekend, you decide to "take it easy." Why? Because you don't want to be that guy—you're trying to balance the scale.

Or imagine you treat a coworker horribly and feel a pang of guilt on the long drive home. So, you decide to do something special for your kids when you walk in the door. Why? To numb the guilt and balance the scale.

Maybe you're older now, and you look back on a reckless past filled with things you're ashamed of. But if we were to look at your life today, we'd see someone who seems like they've spent the last 15 years trying to be a good guy. Not just because it's the right thing to do, but because there's something inside of you that says, "Gotta balance the scale."

Rarely do we go back and address the real issue. We don't often ask ourselves, "Why do I feel the need to party so hard?" We rarely apologize to the coworker or talk to a pastor or therapist about the guilt and shame we carry from the past.

Instead, we try to fix it by balancing it—by putting some good into the universe. We just can't shake the idea that someone, somewhere, is keeping score.

The Problem with the Scale

Christian faith tells us that this view, while common, creates problems. The problem isn't in believing that someone is watching or that there will be an accounting. Indeed, God is watching, and there will be a reckoning. The problem lies in the belief that we can, through our efforts, tip the scales in our favor.

There are two pieces of Scripture that are important to hold on to here:

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” —Genesis 6:5

“If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” —Psalm 130:3

Historic Christianity—the message of Jesus—is this: we’re not just a little messed up. It’s not about a handful of bad things we need to outweigh with a handful of good. There’s a critical corruption within us that is so deep, so offensive, that no amount of effort can counterbalance it. We can’t donate enough to charity, help enough grandmas across the street, or like enough inspirational posts on Instagram to make a dent.

It’s like this: imagine you’re grocery shopping, and you load up your cart. You get to the register, swipe your debit card, and...declined. You try again, but it still won’t go through. People are staring at you, feeling sorry for you. It turns out the bank locked your card because they thought it was fraud. But at that moment, all you know is that you have a load of stuff on the belt, and you can’t pay.

If we load up our lives on the belt and try to pay with our good deeds, our card is going to be declined. We’ll be left standing there with a full cart and the horrible realization that we can’t pay.

And it tracks, right? If God is the Creator of the universe, so beyond us, how could we ever impress Him? And let’s be honest—we’re not living in a world filled with unicorns, hugs, and stardust. There’s real evil going on, and it flows from human hands. Just this past week, we witnessed another school shooting. It wasn’t committed by us individually, but it’s on us as human beings, corporately.

If God is that high and we are so low, can any of us really pile on enough good to impress Him?

The Question

This brings us to a question that philosophers have been wrestling with for millennia: in the end, will the universe—will God—be just, or will He be merciful? Will He ignore the scale, or will He hold us to it? If He does hold us to it, we're toast.

This question hangs in the air throughout the Old Testament. God makes a ton of promises to His people, but they consistently rebel. The question becomes: will their evil lead to God rejecting them, or will He keep forgiving them? Will justice win out, or will mercy win out? Forget about the people—they're a mess. It all comes down to what God will do, because we are helpless.

I remember growing up, my brothers and I would drive our stay-at-home mom crazy. She'd often say, "Wait till your father gets home!" Then she'd call him and let him know what we'd done. And then we'd wait.

The big question was: which dad would show up? Would it be "justice dad," who would ground us and scare us straight? Or would we get "mercy dad," who would come home mad, stomp around a bit, pull us upstairs, and say, "Here's the deal: just make your mom happy. Work up some tears, go give her a hug, and if she asks, I was mad."

Justice and Mercy

So, which God will we get? For thousands of years, the world waited for an answer. And do you know what Christianity teaches? It's not just mercy. It's not just justice. It's both—and we find it in Christ.

In Christ, God Himself comes forward and resolves the tension created by the cosmic scale. Christ came, and in His perfect life, He tipped the scale completely toward the good. And then, in His death, He took the punishment for us having tipped it completely toward the bad.

Now, in Him, both perfection and punishment have taken place. And God the Father looks at us and says, "Come and receive my love."

He fulfills the words of Psalm 103: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” —Psalm 103:10

He dealt with Christ according to our sins and repaid Christ according to our iniquities.

This Changes Everything

This truth changes everything about how we live. First, it changes how we approach God. When we keep the scale in the junk drawer, we see God as someone we need to appease or ignore.

But look again at Psalm 103: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” —Psalm 103:13

The right response to a God who loves like this is awe—holy fear, not the fear of punishment, but the fear of being overwhelmed by His power, His restraint, and His grace. We should be breathless with the fact that He could have crushed us, but He didn’t—and He won’t.

Imagine for a moment that your favorite celebrity suddenly became your friend. Whether it’s Taylor Swift, Michael J. Fox, or Jose Altuve, imagine them wanting to hang out with you all the time. You’d be thinking, “You could be spending time with anyone, and yet you want to be with me?!” You’d be filled with awe that they, with all their status and opportunities, choose to be satisfied with you.

That’s how we should feel about God. He’s not someone we need to ignore or satisfy—He’s someone we get to worship because of Christ.

This truth also changes how we view others and how we treat people. When we believe that spirituality is about being a good person and balancing the scale, it changes the nature of our relationships with others.

The love I show you and the good I do for you ceases to be for you. It’s actually for me. I have to love you so that God will love me. It makes my relationships a means to a selfish end. I’m using you.

This transactional relationship we have with God, where we give in order to get, shapes our relationships with others, making them transactional too. Here's a tip: one sure way to destroy a marriage, a friendship, or a relationship with your child is to operate on the principle of fairness.

If you say, "As long as you're good to me, I'll be good to you," you've just given that relationship a slow, lethal injection. It leaves no room for mercy. If you're going to be in a relationship with someone who's imperfect—and spoiler alert, that's everyone—you have to find a way to love them despite their inability to balance the scales.

And that's what God the Father has done for the world in Christ Jesus.

Look again at Psalm 103: "...the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." —Psalm 103:13b-14

If Christ has been good to me, I'm free to be good to you. I can love simply to love, help simply to help, and give what you don't deserve because I've received what I don't deserve.

Conclusion

After dying in a car accident, three friends meet up as spirits hovering over the crash. One of them asks, "So, when you're in your casket and people are crying over you, what do you want them to say?"

The first friend answers his own question: "I'd like them to say I was great at my craft and a good family man." The second friend says, "I want them to say I was a wonderful husband and that I was truly generous." The third friend thinks for a moment and replies, "I'd like to hear them say, 'Look—he's moving!'"

We all want to be seen as good people. But let me ask you this: How good is good enough? If you insist on using the scale, how can you ever be sure you've tipped it in your favor?

Last year, I had the opportunity to see U2 and Bono perform in the Sphere in Vegas. It was incredible. As I listened to them sing "With or Without You," I

started thinking about an interview Bono gave where he talked about his faith. He said:

“You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics; in physical laws, every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It’s clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I’m absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that ‘as you reap, so you will sow’ stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I’ve done a lot of stupid stuff...I’d be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I’d be in deep s—. It doesn’t excuse my mistakes, but I’m holding out for Grace. I’m holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don’t have to depend on my own religiosity.”

Can we ever tip the scale far enough in our favor? And if we can’t, which way will the universe bend? Will we get what we deserve? Or will we be graded on a curve? Because we all know someone is keeping score.

Thankfully, there’s a better way: Christ. He’s even better than the real thing.

You don’t need the scale. In Christ, God destroys it, and all that’s left is love. Amen.

The Ruler

Introduction: El Capitan

A few years ago, something remarkable happened. Two men achieved what many would consider impossible—they climbed El Capitan, one of the largest sheer rock faces in the world, using nothing but their hands and feet. No ropes to secure them, no safety nets, just their skill and determination. It took them 19 days to ascend 3,000 feet, camping on the side of the rock as they made their way up. To put this in perspective, El Capitan was first climbed in 1970, and it took 27 days with the help of 300 bolts and hundreds of feet of rope. These two friends did it with just their bare hands, gripping onto tiny cracks. Incredible, right?

Today, as we continue to sort through our spiritual junk drawer—a cluttered collection of religious ideas, many of which aren't helpful—we're going to focus on a common item found in most of our drawers: a ruler. This ruler represents our instinct to measure where we are in our faith journey, to gauge how far we've climbed spiritually.

Climbing the Mountain

For many, understanding the Christian faith feels like climbing a mountain, much like El Capitan. We recognize that we're members of God's forgiven family through Jesus Christ, but that's just the beginning—the base of the mountain. Our task, as we often perceive it, is to climb higher, striving for a fuller, more blessed experience

of God. We believe that at the top of this mountain lies a life filled with answered prayers, personal success, and a profound sense of God's presence.

This concept is particularly emphasized in certain Christian circles. Take, for example, the Pentecostal focus on the Holy Spirit. There's an analogy often used—a glass of water. Christians are the glass, and God—the Holy Spirit—is the water. Everyone has some water, but the question is, “Are you full? Is it overflowing?” That's where blessings begin, we're told. And so, we take out our spiritual ruler and measure: Are we full enough?

We see a similar mindset in Prosperity Christianity, a movement centered on the belief that salvation is just the starting point. According to this teaching, God has wealth and success waiting for us, but we must claim it, pray for it, and sometimes even donate to a specific preacher in order to unlock it. Again, the ruler comes out: Are we believing enough?

This idea permeates our everyday lives as well. When something bad happens—a relationship fails, a job is lost, or health deteriorates—we often start measuring ourselves spiritually. We ask, “Am I not a good enough person? Should I pray harder, give more, believe more, be nicer, so that life can be easier?” We assume that if we climb higher spiritually, life will improve personally.

The Problem with Measuring Up

However, Scripture gives us a clear response to this notion of spiritual measurement. In a metaphorical sense, God despises mountain climbers. The Apostle Paul addresses this issue directly in his letter to the Galatians, a church deeply confused by a group of people who pointed out their supposed lack of spiritual growth. This group insisted that simply having faith in Jesus wasn't enough. They claimed that the Galatians also needed to follow specific customs and laws to get closer to God. Their message was clear: “If you climb higher, if you do more, then life will be better.”

Paul, upon hearing this, was furious. In his letter, he condemns the idea of spiritual measuring and climbing: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ... For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Galatians 3:1-2, 10-11)

Paul is essentially saying, “Think this through: You didn’t enter God’s family through your efforts or by keeping the law. You entered through faith in the promise of a crucified and resurrected Jesus. So what makes you think the rules have changed? Why do you now believe you’ll get more of God by being a better person?” In fact, Paul argues, believing this is a recipe for living a cursed life. The idea that the secret to a fulfilled life lies in climbing some spiritual mountain is a burden. You can bloody your hands and climb like crazy for years, but you’ll never arrive.

The Sufficiency of Christ

The truth is, we don’t get closer to God or receive more of His blessings by trying to be better people for Him. We already have all of God through faith in His Son. Period. So put that ruler away!

But this brings up some important questions: “Well then, why is my life such a mess right now?” And, “What about praying, growing in my faith, and being a nicer person? Don’t those things matter?” These are great questions, and they deserve reflection.

Have you ever considered that the reason bad things happen is simply because the world is broken? Maybe it has nothing to do with God being distant from you.

God describes His relationship with us as that of a Father. And how do good fathers operate? Sure, they might offer some incentives, but a good dad doesn’t say, “You’re

in the family, but you'll only get hugs, kisses, kindness, and encouragement if you're really good." That would be terrible. If anything, the opposite is true. The more rebellious, at risk, and struggling the child, the closer the father's presence. He's hovering over, watching out, and speaking truth.

Likewise, growing in faith, being a person of prayer, and being a good neighbor are all important things. But if you ignore them or choose to lock yourself in a room like an angry teenager, are you any less loved? No, you're just acting like a kid.

One reason we get caught up in the idea of climbing toward God is because, like typical children, we don't realize how much of Him we already have. Remember what it was like being 15 years old? Your parents weren't understanding enough. Your house wasn't big enough. Things were never nice enough. It was impossible to see how blessed your life was. It's not until you're older that you realize, "Wow, I had it good."

As sinful creatures, we struggle to see and appreciate the blessings we enjoy and recognize that the only mountains that exist are the ones we create ourselves—and they don't get us closer to Him. If anything, they distract us. The truth is, we already possess the love of the Father through the work of the Son. God is near us now, not on a higher peak commanding us to climb.

Paul emphasizes this point: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:13-14)

Christ climbed the mountain that separated humanity from God so we can enjoy full family status—all of His promises, all of His love, all of His mercy are yours, even if you're a mess.

When God is Closest

So when is the best chance to experience the power of God? Let's return to the father metaphor. When did you go running and wrap your arms around your father's leg? It

was when you had fallen and scraped your knee. When did your parents come running to you with the most passion and power? It was when you were at your lowest point, at the greatest risk to yourself.

We often think we're at the base of grace, with the best of God tucked up high, accessible only through our climbing, our ability, our awesomeness. But the truth is that God lives at ground level with us. He loves to make Himself known when life has fallen apart, when the façade of our ability, control, and importance gets shattered—by failure, by sickness, by struggle. He loves to say, “I know you’ve been busy climbing. But I’ve been waiting to catch you when you fall.”

Paul, the same man who wrote the fiery letter to the Galatians, once wrote this: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (2 Corinthians 11:30)

Why would he say that? Because on this side of eternity, God is best experienced not at the heights of our success but when we are at the end of ourselves. We realize that the only thing we really need is not affirmation from others who can never be satisfied or the wealth of this world, which will all pass away, but grace from our God, who made us who we are. And we have that in abundance through Christ Jesus.

Some of you need to hear that. You’ve gone sliding down the side of a cliff, thinking, “That’s it.” You assume you’re the furthest from God you’ve ever been. But no, it’s the opposite. You’re most ripe to realize His love.

When you sit with people whose lives have fallen apart, you’ll often hear them say, “God must be so mad at me. I feel so far from Him.” And I say no. “No, He’s not far. He’s right here—loving the imperfect, the messed up, and the needy you. That’s where He’s always been.”

Finding God at Ground Level

If you ever feel like God is far away and you don’t have the best of Him, let me offer a few insights into how you can find Him right here on the ground level.

Christians have believed since the beginning that God generously makes Himself known in three primary ways. First, through His creation. The beauty and complexity of the world around us call us out of ourselves and force us to ponder Him. Even if you're not a Christian, you must admit that the beauty of creation has caused you, and every human, to question the existence of a Creator. In creation, we get a general sense of God's reality. That's why it's so helpful to get out and see the beauty of what God has made. "Ok, He's not far off. He's put all this right here."

However, creation only reminds us of God in generalities. We can't pick up a Redwood tree and see the name "Jesus" carved on the bottom, and the stars don't align to spell out His promises. For that, we turn to His people. Christians believe that if you want to feel the physical presence of God, you need to be close to His church.

When someone feels that God is far away, we're supposed to—through our words, our touch, our text messages, our coffee dates—bring God close. That's why community is so critical. We say we want an experience of God, but we can't do that without spending time with His bride, the church. Through her, He comforts and cares for the world.

Third, and most importantly, God speaks with power and in detail through His Word. We strive so hard to get some sense of His approval, yet God has given us just that and more, written down for us to access, hold onto, receive, and be transformed by.

Above all, God has taken all of His promises, all of His truth, all of His power, and wrapped them up in one place, in one person—Jesus Christ. If you ever want to know how God feels about you, what He's like, and what He's done, look to Him.

We often try to climb to a greater experience with God, yet if we open our eyes, we'll see an avalanche of His presence and promises flowing toward us right here in ordinary life. When you're at your lowest, don't pull out the ruler to measure the distance from the divine. He does His best work at the bottom of your mountains.

Look around at His creation. Reach out to His people. Lean on His promises. Through them, He's right there with you.

Closing

There's a story about a conference on comparative religion that took place years ago. A debate arose about what makes Christianity unique. Some argued it was the incarnation, while others said it was the resurrection.

Then C.S. Lewis walked in, that brilliant but eccentric professor with his tweed jacket and stacks of papers. The noise of the debate caught his attention. "What's all this about?" he asked. "We're debating what's unique about Christianity," someone replied. Lewis rolled his eyes. "That's easy," he said, as the room fell silent. He looked up and declared, "Grace."

Christianity uniquely claims that God gives the fullness of Himself to the emptiness of man and requires nothing in return. No bloody hands or busy feet—just grace.

The room remained silent until one man finally spoke up, saying, "He's got a point."

You don't have to climb to God to get more of Him. And when you fall, you are not far from Him. Through faith in Christ, He has carried you to the top of the mountain called mercy, where He offers grace upon grace to you, where he dwells with you forever. Amen.

• W E E K T H R E E •

The Whistle

Introduction

Good morning! Today, we continue in our series called “Junk Drawer Jesus,” where we examine the spiritual junk drawer in our lives. Just like any junk drawer, it's filled with a crazy collection of ideas, beliefs, and practices, some helpful, others not. We're going to see what's truly helpful in following Jesus and what's just clutter.

As we rummage through our spiritual junk drawer, imagine pulling out a whistle—the kind you might wear around your neck. Maybe it's left over from those days when you coached your kid's soccer team, or maybe it's one you “borrowed” from your gym teacher way back when.

You stare at it and think to yourself, “I know what this is for. Doesn't everybody?” You blow the whistle when someone breaks the rules or steps out of bounds. You blow it to get someone's attention when they're doing something wrong.

That whistle represents a certain belief about religion: that it's all about the boundary lines, a list of things you shouldn't do, activities you can't indulge in, and fun you mustn't have. For many people, religion is about God blowing a whistle, calling foul, and saying, “No.”

But here's the problem: the boundary lines are blurry. Depending on which church you attend or which Christian you talk to, God's rules seem to shift and change.

Some churches only blow the whistle for the big stuff: “Try not to kill anybody.” Other churches blow it for everything: “Don’t drink, don’t dance, and make sure your footballs are properly inflated.”

So where’s the reality? What does God really want?

Creation

To answer that, let’s go back to the beginning—Genesis 1. This creation narrative gives us a sense of God’s intentions for us and this world. You’ve probably heard these words before, but I want to focus on what’s known as the “creation mandate.”

Listen to this: *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”*

—Genesis 1:27-28

God made everything—sun, earth, animals, the elements, and all their potential. But He set His eyes on us, handcrafting humanity, and giving us a unique job. Our task is to take the stuff He’s placed in this world and do something with it. We’re meant to imitate Him by creating things of our own and enjoying them.

By giving us dominion over this planet, God gives Himself glory, and we experience joy. How does that work? When we create something out of what God has put here, it reflects highly on Him, and it makes our lives richer and fuller.

God doesn’t want us to run away from things or from culture. He made us to make things, to discover things, and to enjoy culture. That’s the attitude we should have.

This drive to create is what moves us to have children, to make clothing, to prepare food, and to create art. It’s why we make music, discover medicines, and, yes, even produce 63 Batman movies.

God didn’t place us here just to police us. Our calling is to make, use, and enjoy the things of this world. When we do that, God looks good, and we are blessed.

Corruption

But that's the ideal. You know what happens next. Humanity rebels against God's authority, and we are disconnected from His family, riddled with issues. One of the biggest issues? We no longer create or use things in ways that bring us joy and draw us closer to God. Instead, we allow the things we create and use to control us and become our gods.

We take good things, treat them like god-things, and they become bad things. A glass of wine can go from being a wonderful accent to a feast with friends, to a crutch we can't live without. That new phone or killer TV we saved for can become something we need so badly that we're willing to go into debt for it.

It's like watching reality television. It starts as an occasional escape, but soon, you're spending so much time watching that you could argue you're more interested in staring at other people's lives than living your own.

Take a moment to reflect. Where do you see creation controlling you and pulling you away from God, rather than being used rightly by you in a way that causes you to give thanks to God?

For me, I'll be transparent: social media. It's a good thing, but it can quickly become about affirmation and comparison, which are bad things. Or think about shopping—maybe you have a stack of credit cards that the person you're dating, or even thinking about marrying, doesn't know about. Humor is another example. It can be used to bless others, but it can easily become negative and harmful.

And then there's the appreciation of beautiful people. That's a gift from God. But it can be warped into an obsession with looking and lusting.

This is what Christians mean when they talk about sin. It's when good things become god-things. And when that happens, the whistle blows. God calls us out, but He also covers us with the mercy of Jesus. He invites us to love things and use them rightly.

Legalism

Now, Christians tend to part ways on how to deal with the fact that we misuse things. There's a temptation to head toward one of two extremes: legalism or licentiousness.

Let's start with legalism. It's the attitude that says, "Look, since we might misuse certain things, let's just stay away from them altogether." Don't drink—then you can't get drunk. Don't dance—then you can't hook up. Don't watch TV—then you can't binge-watch a show and call in sick to work all week long. Problem solved, right?

This approach blows the whistle all the time. It fills life with spiritual rules designed to keep us safe and make God happy. But in the process, it steps into another error: minimizing our sin and demonizing God's creation.

I used to play golf. But I eventually ran out of two things golf requires: time and money. Still, I noticed something interesting. When golfers shank a ball and break a window, they tend not to blame themselves. Instead, they blame the club. "I told you I need a new driver!" But maybe the real problem is that you just stink at golf!

If the club is really that bad, how did dudes in 1923 shoot 15 under par using nothing but a rock tied to a tree limb? It's not the club; it's the guy holding it. Legalists work the same way. They deal with sin by blaming the object. But the problem isn't alcohol, or great music, or a really good TV show. The problem is us.

Paul addresses this in Galatians chapter 2 when he rails against legalism: *"...we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."* —Galatians 2:16

Paul's reminder is huge. Yes, we should take sin seriously, but nothing we do will keep us sin-free. Nothing we do will make God look at us and say, "Wow, you're holy!" You could go Amish—give up TV, cars, wear wool pants in the summer, and build barns for fun—but even Jedediah will find a way to be a freak.

To live in fear of creation is to reject the Gospel. It says the problem is with things, not with our hearts. But only Jesus changes hearts and makes us right with God.

License

The opposite of legalism is licentiousness. Rather than blowing the whistle every five minutes, this approach throws the whistle away entirely. It says, “Nobody’s perfect, so why even try? Besides, God will forgive us.”

Like legalists, those who live by license also minimize their sin and its impact. But rather than demonizing creation, they give themselves over to it and idolize it.

Maybe you’ve met someone whose lips say, “I love Jesus a lot,” but their life says, “I love everything else more.” There’s some part of their life that’s inappropriately over-the-top or too deeply indulged. Some part of their life where the whistle is never heard.

How does that happen? Because they start to believe a lie: “Because Jesus loves me, Jesus lets me.” Which is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.

It’s like my kid saying, “My dad loves me a lot, which means when I go to college, I can go crazy!” No, I love you so that when you go to college, you won’t go crazy. So you won’t major in “Daddy issues.”

Listen to how Paul responds in Galatians 2:17: *“But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!”* —Galatians 2:17

Paul’s point is clear: Jesus is not an enabler of idolatry—of loving good things as if they were god-things. If we insist on immaturity, if we persist in serving ourselves, we are rejecting the Gospel. Not because we’re trying to earn our salvation—that’s legalism—but because we don’t value it.

Our love of stuff and worship of self is so evil and spiritually corrosive that, in order to rescue us, God sent His Son to be beaten in our place. Do you get that? Do you value that? How dare we keep on serving our desires, going with the flow, in the face of that kind of love?

Liberty and Love

So, if you're tracking with me, the question is: "If we're not supposed to be legalists—blowing the whistle constantly—and we're not supposed to be people of license who throw the whistle away, what's the goal?"

The goal is not legalism or license. The better path is liberty and love. Instead of asking, "What can I get away with?" or "What could go wrong?" we should ask, "What is best? What is loving? What's the most respectful thing I can do for a God who has poured mercy on me? What honors His design? What is most loving to my neighbor? How will my actions affect others?"

Paul explains it this way in Galatians 5: *"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"* —Galatians 5:13-14

We get to this place of liberty and love by confessing our sin and clinging to Christ. When we do that, we address the real issue—our hearts. We're reminded of our true King, Jesus.

Freed from the need to idolize things, we can ask, "God, help me to love rightly. Help me to use things in a way that honors You, brings joy to me, and blesses others!"

And that's where we try to live as a church—confessing sin, basking in grace, and seeking to move forward in liberty and love. We don't demonize things, and we don't idolize things. We confess that our hearts are the real problem in how we use things.

When we see ourselves clearly, when we love Jesus more fully and rightly, we can enjoy things as they were meant to be enjoyed.

Examples

This is why I'm not against alcohol. I believe there's a way to drink alcohol that makes God smile and brings us joy. Yes, it can be abused. But when it is, that's a heart issue, not a sign that alcohol itself is evil.

Everything can be abused. Did you ever see the show *My Strange Addiction*? There was a girl on the show who was addicted to eating couch cushions. That's not God's intention for her life, but we can't outlaw loveseats.

Here's what people who walk in liberty and love do: they ask themselves, "How does God want me to use this? How can others be blessed by this, rather than harmed?"

Now, you might be thinking, "Wait—aren't there things we should never do?" Yes, absolutely. But keep these three things in mind:

First, if it's illegal, you can't do it. There's no way to glorify God by rebelling against the authority He's put in place. There are times when justice requires disobedience. But chances are, your desire to get high with friends doesn't rise to that level. Just saying.

Second, you may have a particular addiction or deep struggle that makes it impossible for you to do certain things. There will be things I can't take part in, but you can, because they hit on wounds I have that you don't.

Third, there are a handful of things that are such an abuse of God's intent that there's no way to use them rightly—they must be rejected. The historical rejection of pornography by the church is one example. Sex is a gift, but pornography warps that gift in a way that can't be redeemed. There's no way to honor God, bless your partner, or bring true joy to yourself by looking at someone's daughter on your phone.

Conclusion

Several years ago, Lisa and I were watching television. Ava, our oldest, was in the other room sleeping, but she could hear our show. We're careful with the language we allow around our daughter—there are certain words that just aren't allowed.

As we were watching, I got a text message from Ava. She was awake and on her iPad. The text said, "Dad—your TV just said a bad word! Should you be watching that?"

I replied, "Don't ask me that question! Why are you awake? Shouldn't you be sleeping?" And then I added, "Besides, it's your mom's show."

It's easy to get into the habit of blowing the whistle and calling foul. Even our kids are great at it. But Christianity is not about legalism or license.

Christianity is not about God constantly blowing the whistle on us, nor is it about us throwing the whistle away and ignoring Him. It's about love. It's about the love of God, who pursues us and forgives us despite our abuse of His creation, so that we might live free—free from worrying about what we get wrong, because we're forgiven. Free from indulging and abusing the gifts of this world, because God has met our deepest needs.

And we are free to put our focus where it belongs: honoring God, enjoying life, and blessing others. So, go ahead—toast with your friends, tell some jokes, enjoy art, and love people.

And when you get too serious or too crazy, call out to Christ. He will set you free. Amen.

The Party Hat

Introduction

Good morning! We are continuing our series called “Junk Drawer Jesus.” In this series, we’ve been talking about how each of us has a spiritual junk drawer—a random collection of religious ideas that we’ve compiled over the years. These ideas shape our spirituality, for better or worse. Like any junk drawer, it’s filled with things we need, but also plenty of things we don’t. You’ve probably asked yourself before, “Why do I even have this in here?”

Today, as we open that drawer, imagine rummaging around and pulling out a paper party hat. It’s one of those pointed, flimsy hats with the little string, maybe left over from a party you threw for one of the many kids in your life.

A party hat is a great reminder that we’ll do just about anything to keep kids smiling. Some of us have even spent small fortunes on princess-themed parties—I know I have.

This party hat represents a belief that many people hold: the belief that God works in the same way we do as parents. There’s this idea that God is the ultimate “appeasing parent,” whose greatest aim is to grant our wishes and keep us happy.

But is that true? Does God exist to make us happy? Let’s dive in.

Origin

I would argue that this idea—that God’s main role is to grant our wishes—is actually relatively new in human history.

Back in the 1700s and 1800s, a school of thought arose called Utilitarianism. It basically said, “Here’s how you know something is right or wrong, good or evil: does it make you happy? If it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, then it’s the right thing to do.”

This had a profound impact on Western law, government, and day-to-day life. It marked a significant shift in thinking. Before this, people believed that good and bad were anchored in external, universal truths—truths put in place by God and meant to be discerned and obeyed by us.

But this new thinking said, “No. Good and bad aren’t determined by some external source; they’re defined by the heart of man.” In the words of Sheryl Crow, “If it makes you happy, it can’t be that bad.” Happiness became the rule of the day.

We took that idea and applied it to religion and spirituality. People began to say, “Well, if God is good, then God must exist for my pleasure.” You see this influence in the “Prosperity Gospel” today, where God’s goodness is measured by whether or not He makes your dreams come true—whether that’s with a big house, good health, or a happy life.

You even hear hints of this thinking in how people respond to tragedy. “How could a good God allow something that makes me sad?” Maybe you’ve thought the same thing in the face of a particular struggle, asking, “What’s wrong with God? He calls Himself a Father, right? And good fathers throw princess parties! They do whatever it takes to make their kids smile. So why am I hurting? Doesn’t He want me to be happy?”

Have you ever asked that question?

Can I give you an answer? Yes, God does like it when you’re happy. But that’s not His highest aim. Happiness, as a goal, proves to be too shallow and unsatisfying. Instead, God’s plan for His people is something better: holiness.

Holiness

Now, that word—holiness—comes with a lot of baggage for us. We tend to see it in a negative light. Many of us associate holiness with self-righteousness, with people who act as if they're somehow better or more refined than everyone else.

It's like when you invite your younger brother over for dinner, and he's one of those kids who only eats chicken nuggets or hamburgers, but then he tells you, "I don't eat meat anymore. It's violent and cruel." And you think to yourself, "Well, someone thinks they're holy."

But holiness, in its simplest form, means "set apart for service." In Christianity, to be holy means that something or someone has been marked and set aside to serve God.

Our faith teaches that when we enter God's family through faith in His Son, Jesus, holiness becomes the new theme of our life. Whatever the theme was before—whether it was being awesome, sexy, aggressive, or bitter—those things become secondary. Your whole life now exists, not for yourself, but to love and serve God.

When I say that, I know a little alarm might be going off in your head: "My life is too broken to be lived for God." Maybe you're thinking, "I've done stuff. I'm still doing stuff. I couldn't be President because people would find out. How could I be set apart to serve God? I'm like a paper plate when He needs fine china."

Here's the beauty of the Christian promise: holiness isn't just a new way to live; it's a gift He gives to you. It's a new identity that comes from Him.

When you were baptized into God's family, a switch took place. Jesus Christ took your garbage—all your sin—which He paid for, forgave, and overcame on the cross. And in exchange, you got His perfection.

Now, when God the Father looks at you, He doesn't see your bad habits or your big hang-ups. He sees a holy child—He sees Christ—a perfect, beloved servant. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true.

It's like when I took my son to sign up for Little League baseball. He didn't know a thing about baseball, but they gave him a cap and a jersey and a spot on the roster, nonetheless. He didn't know how to play, but he had the identity of a ballplayer. It was now his job to learn the game and play.

Paul writes in Philippians: "Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." —Philippians 2:12b-13

These words are helpful. God has done the work of salvation and holiness in you through Christ. You've got the uniform. Now, He wants to work that holiness through you.

Purpose

At this point, you might be thinking, "I get it. God gives me the identity of 'holy' as a set-apart servant through Christ. The theme of my life shifts from pursuing my happiness to living for His glory. But how is that better?"

Let me give you three reasons. First, if God's goal for your life is holiness, then there is purpose in the pains of life.

If God exists to make me happy, then every struggle, every pain is a betrayal. There's no way to reconcile the tragedies that will happen or the mistakes I will make.

It's like picturing yourself running a marathon. If life is purely about your happiness and on your terms, then God is just there to hand you water and cheer you on as you dash toward your desired goals. Every heartbreak and every problem feels like Him sticking out His leg and tripping you up.

But listen to these words from the book of Hebrews, and note how it speaks of struggle: "God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to

the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”
—Hebrews 12:7-10

God invites us to see ourselves as His chosen children. And what do good dads do? They don't just throw parties. They correct, they confront, and sometimes they step back and allow us to struggle. Why? Because they're not there to indulge the child, but to mold and shape the heart and character of the child, and facilitate a larger, long-term plan for that child.

You are a beloved child of God, set apart to be used by Him. Your suffering is not a stumbling block—it's part of His plan. God is doing something in your life, and you can trust that what's happening now happens for a reason.

What's the biggest struggle in your life right now? It could be massive, or it could be something small and petty. But have you considered that God isn't “getting in the way,” but rather working for your good? Could He be shaping your character? Molding your heart? Teaching you patience? Trust?

Could your pain be an instrument for His glory? Maybe how you hold on to Him in the midst of trouble is showing the world how worthy of worship He truly is.

Dependence

Second, when life is about holiness, it drives us to dependence upon Christ.

Have you ever noticed how, when a person gets everything they want, they tend to forget who they are? It doesn't always happen, but we've all seen it, maybe even in ourselves. We tend to be most dangerous not just at our lowest points, but often when we're at our highest.

When life feels like a party where we get exactly what we want, it usually makes us hungrier, not happier. When we accomplish something awesome, it can make us think we're invincible. Our view of ourselves gets clouded, and our grip on God gets loose.

But when we understand life as a pursuit of holiness—serving Him, trusting Him not just in joy but also in pain—it drives us to cling to Christ. We cling to Him for three reasons: as our example, our assurance, and our grace.

Hebrews says: “...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” —Hebrews 12:1b-3

I have several friends who are serious runners. I’m talking about people who run not just marathons but 30-50 miles in one shot. Right now, I don’t even have enough gas in my car to drive that far, let alone enough energy in me to run it.

What I’ve heard from my friends is that, as they’re running, it helps to have a hero in mind—someone they can focus on for guidance and hope. As they sweat and stumble, they say to themselves, “What would he do?” Or when they want to give up, they think, “If he did it, I can do it.”

The writer of Hebrews says the same thing about Jesus. As we go through life in pursuit of holiness, we have Jesus to set our eyes upon.

Looking to Him means seeing the example He set: to live a life for God’s glory, not just for our happiness.

But more importantly, along the way, He gives us assurance. In a season of struggle or a moment of pain, it’s really easy to get mad at God. “Isn’t this supposed to be my party?” It’s hard to believe that He’s molding us, shaping us, and using us.

Maybe that’s where you are today. If life were about happiness, you’d feel like He’s failing you. But look to the cross of Christ and be assured—He loves you. He sent His Son for you! The darkest moments of your life can be used for His glory and your good.

Likewise, when life is about holiness, you depend on Christ as a constant source of grace. There are moments every day when I realize just how terrible I am at

holiness. I'm terrible at trusting Him, obeying Him, or even remembering Him. But a constant stream of grace flows from Christ, covering my reluctance with His perfect obedience.

Beauty

Because God's goal for us is holiness, there will be greater beauty in this broken world.

The things that make for a better world don't come naturally to us. Otherwise, we'd already be living in that better world. The things that are truly beautiful—love, sacrifice, generosity—are difficult. They don't come easily in a world where everyone is entitled to their own happiness.

You see, birthday party happiness is all about receiving what you want. But truly beautiful things are all about letting go and giving what's required. And those things have to be taught.

Don't believe me? Just watch really small children. They're all thieves. Natural-born burglars. The easiest word for them to learn isn't "mom" or "dad"—it's "mine." They'll take your cup, steal your keys, and open your drawers. I once watched a toddler grab a cookie off the table and stuff it in his diaper.

That's our default programming. It doesn't change until parents step in and teach us to share, to say "please," and to be kind.

The same is true for us in our relationship with God. He lays hold of us and makes us holy through faith in Christ. Then, He invites us into a more beautiful life than we could otherwise live.

When you forgive your sister-in-law, that's more beautiful. When you give your stuff to someone in need, that's more beautiful. When you confess your sins and stop kidding yourself, that's more beautiful. When you marry that girl rather than leading her on, or when you stay faithful to your husband rather than flirting with a coworker—that's more beautiful. When you pursue peace with your enemy and pray for the guy who's talking behind your back, that's more beautiful.

None of it is easy. None of it will make you happier—at least, not right away. It will always cost you something. But all of it will bring glory to Him and add beauty to the world.

Hebrews says: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” —Hebrews 12:11

God walks us through difficult things because we are His servants. And in the end, according to Him, it will bear beautiful fruit.

Maybe there’s a choice staring you in the face right now. You know it’s the holy thing to do—the right thing to do—but you’ve been avoiding it because it will hurt to live it out. It will cost you something you crave or get in the way of your gratification. What is it?

If life is about short-term happiness, you should keep avoiding it. But what if God has called you and saved you for bigger things? What if you’re meant to be a force for better things? What if it requires you to do difficult, counter-intuitive, and temporarily painful things—things that are ultimately holy and lovely?

What if God didn’t put you here to stuff cookies in your diaper, but to add beauty to His world?

Conclusion

August of 2015 was a big one in the Popovits household. My son turned 1, and my daughter turned 10. Lisa and I had started discussing the party we were going to throw months in advance. We asked Ava to help pick the theme, and I was hoping she would go for something like “middle-aged preacher” or “boring book collection.” But no.

Truth be told, we were willing to do whatever would make them happy that day. That’s how good parents roll. That’s what birthdays are for—getting what you wish for.

But life in general is a different story. Every other day of the year, my greatest concern isn't what my kids are wishing for. My greatest concern is who my kids are becoming. They've been given to me, not just to indulge, but to mold and shape into people who bring honor to the family name and beauty to a broken world.

If I only threw parties, I'd be doing no one any favors.

God has greater hopes for you than your happiness. He's making you into someone, and there's purpose in your pain. You are part of His plan, which is daunting, yes, but it drives us to depend on Christ. He's calling you to do difficult things, but He's also committed to making this world a more beautiful place through you.

Sure, we want a life filled with party hats. But God has gifted us and invited us to holiness. Amen.

• W E E K F I V E •

The Rabbit's Foot

Introduction

Good morning! Today, we're closing out our series, "Junk Drawer Jesus." Over the past few weeks, we've been opening up our spiritual junk drawers and rummaging through the random collection of spiritual ideas we all carry.

Why have we been doing this? Because just like any junk drawer, some of the things we hold onto in our spiritual lives are helpful, but many of them—maybe even most of them—simply aren't. Instead of helping our Christian spirituality, they cloud and confuse it.

Today, as we open up the drawer one last time, we find something really strange but incredibly common. It's a lucky rabbit's foot. Do you remember these? It's a key-chain that was all the rage in the '80s. You probably had one. I'm not sure how I got mine, but I know I carried it with me for a long time. It's stupid, but I just couldn't bring myself to throw it away.

Here's a useless piece of information: not just any rabbit's foot was considered lucky. According to folklore that dates back to the Celts in 600 AD, it had to be the left hind leg of a cemetery rabbit, captured under a certain phase of the moon. Strange, right?

This little trinket represents something important: the fact that every one of us has a bad, strange habit. It's the habit of thinking we can get from a tiny piece of creation what only comes from the Creator. It's called idolatry.

Central Issue

I've been married for almost 23 years, and early on, I learned something that has been incredibly helpful in my marriage: most of the time, the thing we're fighting about isn't the thing we're fighting about.

Before I understood this, there was a lot of confusion. I thought we were "discussing" how I threw my socks on the floor. Then, next thing I know, there are tears, and she's saying things like, "You just don't get it, do you?" And I'm sitting there thinking, "No, I don't. It wasn't even both socks. I missed my first shot." I'd say, "Don't think of it as cleaning up after me. Think of it as grabbing the rebound!"

Eventually, the light bulb went off in our relationship. It wasn't about the socks—it was about respect. Checking my phone during dinner wasn't about my emails—it was about priority. Calling my mom when I didn't feel good wasn't about getting advice—it was about maturity. There was the issue, and then there was the real issue.

Christian spirituality talks a lot about sin, which is essentially a thousand ways we live out of step with the will of the One who made us. But Scripture leads us to believe that there's a larger issue beneath the surface of our struggles.

The central problem of humanity is idolatry. It's the thing behind the thing.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, once said, "There is really just one commandment: have no other gods before me. The other nine are just ways in which we break it." Idolatry is the core motivation behind all our broken behavior.

Why do I break promises? Why do I take things that aren't mine? Why do I hurt or kill others? Fundamentally, it's because there's something I must have or must protect in order to feel whole—something that's more important to me than God Himself. Protecting it or getting it justifies my actions. That's idolatry.

The theme of 1 John is love—God's incredible love for us in Christ and our call to love one another. But this beautiful little book ends in a way that some consider strange.

“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”
—1 John 5:20-21

“Keep yourselves from idols?” you might wonder. What does that have to do with love? When you think about it, though, it makes sense. John is saying, “Don’t get your love mixed up.” We tend to love things that are good as if they were God—and that’s the root of all our issues.

Defining Idolatry

Let me give you what I think is the best definition of idolatry.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, puts it like this: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.” —Romans 1:25

Idolatry is living as if a created thing is God or believing that a created thing can give you what only God can provide.

There are two aspects to idolatry. First, it’s about replacing God. We take something in our life and seek from it what only God can give. We put our job, our kids, our possessions on a pedestal, sacrificing everything for them—not just because we love them, but because we believe they’ll give us ultimate peace, wholeness, and validation.

The second aspect is trying to manipulate God. We focus on some part of our life, thinking that if we use it correctly, we can force God to do what we want. It’s like the story of the golden calf. While Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, the people made a golden statue and started dancing and sacrificing to it. We assume they created a new god, but in reality, they were trying to control the real God. They thought, “If we build this, He’ll show up and give us what we want.”

This is a trap religious people often fall into. We think, “If I say the right prayers, give enough money, or do my devotions every day, then Jesus has to give me a certain blessing or show up in a powerful way.” That’s idolatry.

Idolatry is bigger than statues and shrines. An idol can be an object, a person, an activity, an institution, a hope, or a pleasure.

Anything we grab hold of in life, wrongly believing that if we squeeze it tightly, serve it rightly, or obsess over it relentlessly, it will give us what only God can—or it will force God’s hand.

Digging Deeper

If you’re thinking, “I wonder if I have any idols in my life,” you’re asking the wrong question. The question isn’t if you have idols; it’s what your idols are.

Idols are like belly buttons and crazy uncles: we all have them.

If you’re not sure what yours are, I invite you to reflect on three things. A fair warning—you might not like what you find. But consider the obsessions of your mind, the spending of your money, and the triggers of your emotions.

Let’s start with the mind. I found this quote the other day, and it cut me to the core. Archbishop William Temple said, “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” Where do your thoughts go when nothing else is commanding your attention?

Do you find yourself pondering people’s opinions of you? Are you constantly crafting a path to success? Is it sex? Is it the need for affection? Is it the voice of a person from your past? Where does your heart habitually go to find its worth?

Jesus famously said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” One way to see where a person places their hope is to examine where they put their money. Is there a part of your life where you constantly overextend yourself financially or lack discipline? That’s a good clue to where you truly think your well-being comes from.

Lastly—and this one’s hard—analyze your extreme emotions. What triggers your greatest joys? Be honest—it’s not always your kids or kittens. What drags you into a

massive funk, instantly and without fail? Ask yourself, “Should this thing have that much control over me?”

I know none of this sounds fun, but it’s essential. Think of it like gardening. It’s tempting to just examine the surface of a plant, but a good gardener will tell you that every once in a while, you need to dig deep. Bugs live beneath the surface, clinging to the roots and causing significant struggle.

The same is true for us as humans. Every once in a while, you need to dig deep into your thinking, spending, and feeling. When you pull them up by the roots, you’ll often find your idols chewing away at them.

Why It Matters

At this point, some people might raise an objection: “So what? If I’m not a Christian, why do you care what my idols are? And if I am a Christian, doesn’t the grace and mercy of Christ on the cross forgive me?”

Let me explain why it matters. Idolatry is not just an offense to the one true God—which, by the way, is reason enough to care—but it also results in two things that our culture hates: the suppression of personal freedom and the oppression of the weak.

Idolatry, unchecked, is enslaving and destructive. Always.

The small, created things we bow to in our search for freedom eventually become huge things that rob us of it. Take your career, for example.

If you pour your identity into your work, thinking you’ll find all the acceptance and affirmation you need, you’ve made it an idol. And now, every setback isn’t just an issue at work; it’s a hit to your heart. You’ll also find that even your successes are short-lived. You prove yourself on one project, but with the next, you have to start from scratch. Your new colleagues aren’t just people—they’re threats who could take your job or steal your joy. The approval of your boss dictates how you feel about yourself.

The whole scheme backfires: the very thing you worshiped for freedom ends up taking it from you.

Likewise, idolatry always results in someone getting hurt. You will either crush the thing you worship under the weight of your expectations, or it will crush you under the weight of its demands.

For example, if what you love more than anything is the approval of others, it will crush you. There will always be another person to impress, another crowd to convince. A life of unending service to that god will wear you down.

Or, if you put a certain relationship on a pedestal, do you realize what you're asking of the other person? You're asking someone who isn't whole themselves to make you whole. They can't do it. Their failure to meet that impossible expectation will drive you to ask more. You're not really loving them—you're setting them up for failure. This is the ground where resentment grows and bitterness burns.

The theologian Augustine famously said, "You have made us for yourself, [Lord], and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

When you hold something that isn't God as if it is, it cannot satisfy you. And if you insist on holding onto it, you'll either squeeze it so tightly that you harm it, or it will harm you.

This is why the Bible uses such strong language when talking about idolatry. It tells us to run from it, flee from it, and put it to death, because in the end, not only is it an offense to the real God, but it will also restrict your freedom and harm others.

Confession

Now, after all that, you might be thinking, "Okay, so what's the solution? Do I just gather up all my idols—my rabbit's feet—and throw them away? Do I just try harder to love God more?" The problem is, that's not possible.

When we first moved to Texas, we bought a house, and shortly after moving in, we realized that we had a bug problem—cockroaches were everywhere. So, we called the exterminator, and he came out to treat the house. After he left, I asked, "So, we shouldn't have to do this again, right? We're good now?" He smiled and said, "Son,

you live in Texas. Bugs here are big, bad, and vote Republican. You'll be seeing a lot more of me."

The bug problem never really gets solved. You find a way to manage it and live with it, which results in becoming good friends with the exterminator.

In the same way, this side of eternity, we don't solve our idolatry problem. It's not something that gets cured or fixed; it's something that is continually confessed and forgiven.

Look with me again at 1 John: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols." —1 John 5:20-21

Before John tells us to stay away from idolatry, he reminds us that we have Christ and that Christ is "true." He is not a false god, but the real God.

How do we know He's not a false god? How do we know He can handle our hopes, dreams, and needs? How do we know that He can give us the meaning, assurance, and love we long for?

Because He took upon Himself the punishment for our sin—the payment for our idolatry. He allowed the weight of every single person's needs, cries for forgiveness, and desire for access to God to be laid on Him. And He let it crush Him. But then, He crushed it back by rising from the grave.

By doing so, He proved that everything He promised is true—He is God in the flesh. He proved that He's capable of carrying the weight of all our God-sized needs on His resurrected shoulders.

The life of a Christian is a life of realizing—often the hard way—that we've been loving something the wrong way and asking too much of it. It's a life of regularly returning to the one true God, getting to know Him better, and calling Him in, saying, "They're back."

When He returns, He doesn't scold us. He doesn't say, "I told you so." He says what John repeats over and over in his letter: He loves you.

An idol—a false god—will always ask for more. But Jesus, the real God, says, "I am enough. My cross forgives you. My empty tomb assures you. My grace is sufficient for you."

Conclusion

I've never understood why people carry good luck charms, especially a rabbit's foot. It has no real power, and half the time, it's not even a real foot!

But the truth is, all of us are holding tightly to things that can't give us what we're asking of them.

It's not about the sock on the floor. It's not about working too much. It's not about being overly sensitive or just being a needy person. There's a thing beneath the thing. We're trying to wring meaning, peace, and satisfaction out of creation rather than from the Creator.

Confess it. Admit it. Don't settle for being enslaved to things so small.

Remember, hear, and believe this: there is a God who is worthy of your obsessive love, and He has nothing but mercy and grace for those of us who have mixed up our loves. Amen.