

## ***Worship: Because Idolatry Ruins Us***

Kenwood Baptist Church

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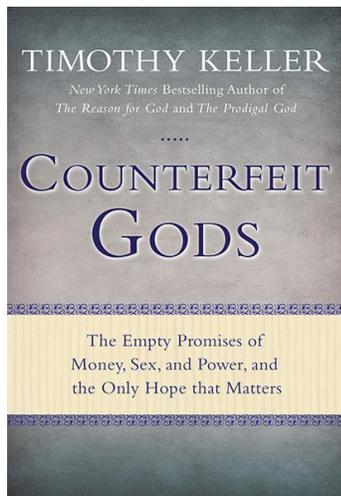
November 11, 2018

**TEXT: 2 Chronicles 28:1-25**



We praise God for His power and work in our lives. This morning as we look to God's Word, I want to give a just a moment to honor those among us as we remember Veterans Day. If you have served in the military, active-duty or reserves, would you stand for a moment so we can honor you? You know about battles, and this morning, we look at a spiritual battle. We have been in a series this fall on worship, and we have been stressing that worship is the determinative factor, not only in the success and failure of our lives, but our worship of God really sets the course of it. We have seen examples that are inspiring and challenging, and God, as our heavenly father, has placed in His Word exemplary figures so that we can imitate their faith. We need not only positive examples, but we also need warnings, don't we? This morning's text is a danger, and I know as we heard it, some of us are thinking: "What does this have to do with me?" Well, it has everything to do with us, because this morning's text is really about the danger of idolatry, that worship is central to our lives, to our being as people made in the image of God, and if we do not worship God, it's not that we don't worship. It is that we worship other gods. We live in a secular environment in our society. We flatter ourselves thinking that we are secular, that we are not really religious people in our culture. Tim Keller, a Gordon-Conwell graduate and a really insightful theological critic of our time, has written a book called *Counterfeit Gods*, and Keller's book has really helped me this week. The subtitle is

*The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters.* It's a great and powerful little book about idolatry in our time. Keller says this:



“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”

Keller recognizes that we are all religious, actually, and we are all worshipers, because we are made to worship. We are either worshiping the living God who brings us life and joy and peace and satisfaction, or we are going to worship idols that destroy us, and there is really no alternative. Keller again says:

“An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. The Bible uses three basic metaphors to describe how people relate to the idols of their hearts. They *love* idols, *trust* idols, and *obey* idols.

“Romance or success can become ‘false lovers’ that promise to make us feel loved and valued. Idols capture our imagination, and we can locate them by looking at our daydreams. What do we enjoy imagining? What are our fondest dreams? We look to our idols to love us, to provide us with value and a sense of beauty, significance, and worth.

“The Bible often speaks of idols using the religious metaphor. God should be our true Savior, but we look to personal achievement or prosperity to give us the peace and security we need. Idols give us a sense of being in control, and we can locate them by looking at our nightmares. What do we fear the most? What, if we lost it, would make life not worth living? We make ‘sacrifices’ to appease and please our gods, who we believe will protect us. We look to our idols to provide us with a sense of confidence and safety.

“The Bible also speaks of idols, using a political metaphor. God should be our only Lord and Master, but whatever we love and trust we also serve. Anything that becomes more important and nonnegotiable to us than God becomes an enslaving idol. In this paradigm, we can locate idols by looking at our most unyielding emotions. What makes us uncontrollably angry, anxious, or despondent? What racks us with a guilt we can’t shake? Idols control us, since we feel we must have them or life is meaningless.”

Brothers and sisters, idolatry is all around us. John Calvin said that the human heart is an idol factory. So, we need 2 Chronicles 28, because we see the idolatry of Ahaz vividly before us, and we see that idolatry ruins this man. It is powerfully instructive for us. King Ahaz of began to reign when he was 20 years old, and Ahaz is significant for number of reasons. He has a special place in archaeology. Ahaz's seal was the first of the kings of Judah’s seal to be discovered in the 1990s. The seal is smaller than a dime, and you can see the archaic Hebrew script. The bulla

is actually the impression of Ahaz's seal. The clay bulla was baked, and the inscription inside the



seal identifies the owner of the seal as belonging to Ahaz, son of Jotham, king of Judah. If you look closely at the left side of the picture, you can see those lines which are the edge of Ahaz's thumbprint as he pressed his seal into the clay. I want you to see this because the Bible is not a myth. The Bible is not made-up stories. These events really happened. As we heard in Amy's testimony earlier, Jesus Christ is real, and He is here now, and He wants to teach us now. So, I want to ask you to have your ears attentive and

your heart open to what the Holy Spirit is going to say to you now.

Let's look at the life of this king. He was 20 years old when he began to reign. I don't know what you were doing when you were 20, but as I look around, I think very few of us were kings. He was 20 and he reigned 16 years. His reign starts off rapidly in the wrong direction. He did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He made metal images for the Baals. He worshiped like the idolatrous northern kingdom, the syncretism of adding in the worship of Baal, the Canaanite storm god. He made offerings in the Valley of Hinnom to Molech, and even burned his sons as an offering. In antiquity, a child sacrifice goes up in times of prosperity. We sacrifice our children, actually, when we have wealth around us. You can even see this in the archaeological record. At first glance, we might think this has nothing to do with me, but isn't it the case that many careers in times of prosperity bring with them an unstated expectation in the job description that you will sacrifice your family? It is in the job description for many. It is in the times of prosperity when we think children are a liability, and this happens in the reign of Ahaz. He acted like the nations that the Lord drove out before Israel. He sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, the hills, and under every green tree. He proliferated idolatry. The theological vision of Chronicles, that we've been looking at, tells us that if you're not worshiping God, you are worshiping someone or something else. You are giving your heart to something else, and God, as your heavenly Father who loves you, will actually correct you and warn you about that. It is unloving not to correct a child. When you see someone veering off into danger, to say nothing is to hate that person. Sometimes as parents, we are afraid to correct our children. The Bible says that the person who doesn't correct the child hates them, and God, because of His love for us, hands Ahaz over to the dark reality of the path that he is set out on. Notice in 2 Chronicles 28:5, that God is the subject:

*"Therefore the LORD his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force."*

Ahaz is struck down, and we read in 2 Chronicles 28:6:

*“For Pekah the son of Remaliah killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because they had forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers.”*

That’s a dark day, and this devastation is not just for the conscripted army, but this devastation, we are told, even reaches into the king's own family, as Maaseiah, the king's son, dies. Not only do warriors die, not only does this son perish, but the men of Israel in the north capture 200,000 of their relatives and take the women and children and plunder off. God's mercy sends Oded, a prophet, who comes in and tells the people that what they are doing is wrong, and we see, actually hear, the compassion of God for the captive in war. God sends a prophet who says: “You don’t treat people like that,” and the northern kingdom, with their train of the spoils of war and the captives, have a prophet of the living God come and tell them: “What you're doing is wrong.” These men of the north repent for what they are doing, and it is really a fantastic scene. They repent and we read in 2 Chronicles 28:15:

*“They clothed [the captives], gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.”*

That’s the biblical God's ethic of war. But, we are talking about Ahaz. What happens?

Ahaz loses this battle with tremendous loss, invasion from the north. So, what you do when things are going poorly? Ahaz, in distress, does not look to the Lord. Instead, he reaches out for help to the king of Assyria who was the military and economic superpower of the day. So things are going badly, and he turns his back on God. He feels the repercussions of that, and then he looks to this pagan king for help. That's what idolatry does. It's amazing to me as idolatry starts to destroy us, we think: “Well, I just need to give more to the idol, and then the idol will help me.” When we attach our heart to anything other than God and that thing doesn't provide and starts to take from us instead of giving, we have the instinct to say: “Well, maybe I didn't give enough.” Idolatry functions in our lives like a theological boa constrictor which wraps itself around us again, giving us less and less room to breath. Ahaz looks to the king of Assyria for help, because, we’re told, the boundaries of his kingdom are shrinking rapidly. The Edomites are pouring in from the east; the Philistines are coming up the coastal plain from the west. We read in 2 Chronicles 18:19:

*“For the LORD humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the LORD.”*

We see that Ahaz pleas for help to Tiglath-pileser, the king of Assyria, the idols of whose nation Ahaz places his trust. In reply, Tiglath-pileser comes down against him and afflicts him. So, the place where he goes for help turns against him. If you lean into idolatry, those idols will

abandon you, but Jesus Christ will never leave you nor forsake you. Ahaz goes to meet Tiglath-pileser, we are told in the parallel narrative of 1 King 16, and when Ahaz went to Damascus and met Tiglath-pileser, he saw an altar, an Assyrian altar, and he was enamored with this altar. He took that design of the altar, and he gave instructions for the priest in Jerusalem to build an altar to the Assyrian gods and to put that altar in front of the altar of the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem. He told the priests: "Take the sacrifices that we offer daily to the Lord and put them on my altar, the Assyrian one." It is devastating, and things unravel even more. Tiglath-pileser, the one in whom he places trust for help, told him instead: "How about some tribute?" Ahaz, whose kingdom was unraveling, decides to pay the tribute by taking the gifts that were given for the house of the Lord, and he gave them over to the king of Assyria. Then we read in 2 Chronicles 28:22:

*"In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD—this same King Ahaz."*

We read in 2 Chronicles 22:23:

*"For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, 'Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.' But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel."*

It is a such a pitiful, sad scene. Here is the king of God's people bowing down to these idols who can't deliver, and saying: "Because the gods of Syria have helped, I'll sacrifice to them!" But they were the ruin of him.

Brothers and sisters, I am jealous for you. I really am. I feel a holy jealousy for you. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the call of faithful ministers is to "betroth you to just one husband." I know some of you are thinking: "I'm not bowing down to the gods of Syria," but the gods of this society do come in. They come in sometimes because they knock and you let them in. Sometimes the gods of our society are hard to recognize. Do you believe that God works in airplanes and airports? I do. I saw God working in an airport yesterday. I was on my way home from teaching at Gordon-Conwell, and I changed planes in Philadelphia's big airport. Lots of people were there. I wasn't even at my gate. I had stopped to get a little something to eat at the food court, and this young woman looked at me. I had taken a scoop of my Chipotle with guacamole and started eating, and she just looked right at me and said to me: "Do you have anything to do with Kenwood Baptist Church?" I finished my bite and I said: "Actually I do. I'm one of the pastors there." She said: "Were you interviewing Elie Haddad?" and I said: "Yes, actually I was," and she said: "I was there, and God used that time in my life to show me about the power of being able to minister to people in crisis and need, and so I'm exploring becoming a Christian counselor. I've flown on here to Philadelphia to visit Westminster Seminary because they have a counseling program." That's the life, isn't it? That's the life that only the living God can offer.

God works powerfully, but the idols around us will always fail us. They will break our hearts; they will not reciprocate our love; their voices will not be heard to our prayers. Ahaz looked everywhere but to God. We read in 2 Chronicles 28:24, that finally, in the end, as the idols took life from him:

*“And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, . . .”*

In the rest of this verse, one of the saddest verses in this book of the Bible, we read:

*“. . .and he shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem.”*

He was willing to look anywhere but to God, and he made altars in every corner in every city.

Brothers and sisters, this morning this text is a warning. If you give your heart to anyone or anything, if anything is more important to you than God, if there is anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, if there is anything that you seek to give you what only God can give you, then an idol is in your life. When Elie Haddad was here, if you remember, he said: “You know, I think ministry is harder for you here in the United States.” I was surprised when he said that. He said: “The idols of this society, they just walk right into the church and sit down, and we don't even recognize them.” Americans spend their lives and spend their resources on things that have ever-diminishing return. Back to Keller. Keller says:

*“A counterfeit god [an idol] is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”*

Is there anything in your heart like that? He goes on to say:

*“An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving ‘face’ and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry.”*

Ouch! That was for me.

*“When your meaning in life is fixed to someone else’s life, [or to a child that we must have reciprocated] we may call it ‘co- dependency,’ but it is really idolatry. An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’ There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*.”*

Brothers and sisters, we are made to worship, and we will worship. But, the great question is: "Whom will we worship?" We live in this secular setting, the glittering gods of our age, they hold the title of our hearts for many of us: If I just had that position, my life would be meaningful; if we lived here, then I'd know that I was somebody; if my children do better than I did, then I'll know I really did something. Anything more important to you than God is an idol. What you must have is the good news of this text this morning: We serve a God who speaks unlike the idols. The Bible says the idols have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have mouths, but they don't work, but God speaks, and He speaks to us kindly enough to warn us. He has hands that are powerful enough to save us, and His Word is clear enough to help us discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Isn't that a glorious feature of the Word of God? Augustine said that "the Word of God is the face of God for now." Hebrews says that "the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword." It is so sharp it can help you to see and separate and clarify the difference between the thoughts and intentions and motivations of your heart, and it can clarify and help you discern that "there's an idol right there! Look at that!" The good news is you can come into God's house as a sick person, with idolatrous disease in your heart, and you can come in here, and we will all be glad to see you, because we are all sick, idolatrous people. The good news is that we don't stay that way, because something happens when we open this Book. Something happens to me; something happens to you. You open this Book, and the radiance of the glory of God shines and you see what you could not see, and the Idol that you're tempted to place your trust and significance and meaning is exposed, and we are offered freedom, not slavery. Keller says:

"The only way to free ourselves from the destructive influence of counterfeit gods is to turn back to the true one. The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the Cross, is the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you, and, if you fail him, can truly forgive you."

If the Word has brought your idols to light, then the call is simple. It is just to turn to living God this morning and ask Him to forgive you. He has revealed Himself in glory on the cross, is raised, and reigns this morning, and offers you freedom in following Him. We are invited to step away from the suffocating, death-dealing power of idolatry. Let's pray.

O Lord. We need You. We need Your Word. We need it. I need it. Lord, I need the light of Your countenance in my life to help me see what I cannot see on my own. Lord, Your Word helps me see the things that look normal to me in my life, things that You hate and that are trying to kill me. I thank You, Father, that You do that for all of us, and that Your Word gives us admonition and encouragement, but also gives us rebuke and correction and warning. So, Lord, I pray for my brothers and sisters, that we might together turn towards You, living God, that we would come to the altar where there are no regrets and that we would offer You ourselves as an act of

worship, that we would sing to You. Lord, we want we want to sing to You as a declaration of our turning away from the idolatries that grip us, whatever they are. The specifics don't really matter. What does matter is that we come to You. Lord, we thank You that You are here, that You speak to us, You instruct us in the way in which we should go, and that You stand ready and willing to forgive. Lord, when we find You, we find life. We praise You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.