

**March 11, 2018**  
**Lent: My Mid-Life Crisis?**  
**Isaiah 53:7-12**

I must be getting older: I was thinking about life the other day. ***What is really important to me? Why? What am I doing about it?*** My immediate response to myself was, *"If the focus of Jesus' life and ministry was the Kingdom of God, then the focus of my life ought to be the Kingdom of God. I want people to know Jesus. I want them to really wrestle with how knowing Jesus changes their lives. And then I want them to live for Jesus."*

I want to talk about this today. I want to talk about Jesus – Jesus as we meet Him in the gospels AND Jesus as we meet Him in Isaiah 53:7-12. But I want to start by NOT talking about Jesus. Because in the culture we live in, very few people talk do about Jesus. Jesus is one personal religious option for people, but for most people – including a lot of people who would call themselves "Christians" – Jesus really doesn't matter much to our values, ethics, or day to day business of life.

I remember EXPO 86 in Vancouver. Various countries had pavilions. Significantly, in the pavilions for countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan you knew you were in a pavilion for a Moslem majority country – verses from the Koran and Islamic art were everywhere. But when you went into pavilions from Canadian provinces, US States, or Western countries, you saw pictures of fighter planes, high speed rail, and computers. You knew instantly what important: religious heritage or technology, business, and corporate power.

Let's use a biblical term, "idols." **Idols are simply good things we treat as if they were God.** People in both the Old and New Testaments were very familiar with idols – good things, from the sun and the moon to sex and wine, became gods and goddesses. Religious temples and shrines were the dominant buildings in the cities. Our most important buildings still dominate our skylines, but they aren't religious buildings. Or are they? Idols demand sacrifices and promise rewards. In our culture, what demands our loyalty? What promises reward? What do we sacrifice for? What controls and shapes our decisions?

### **1. When good becomes God**

The things we give allegiance to are not bad things. The sun is a good thing: it gives light, heat, and energy necessary for life. But when ancient peoples worshipped the sun, they substituted what was good for God. Sexuality is a good thing in the right context. Sex is good, but sex is not God.

The challenge is God is a bit remote and distant. "Things" are more immediate and tangible: we can touch money and what money can buy. With tangible things we are in control: we think we are in charge of our purchases. I decide what to buy. When I look at something and cherish it and treasure it, I feel good. But then something goes terribly wrong ...

Think about our sense of country. I love Canada. But if a good, innocent enjoyment of being

Canadian becomes a nationalism where my I begin to believe my country – or my cultural group – is better than others, it becomes an idol. When I smugly believe my culture is better than others, I am missing out on God's good gifts, and I devalue His people. If I get more attached to a political party and their agenda than to Jesus, I'm rewarded for loyalty and promised rewards, but I have an idol. However, it sure makes me feel good to feel superior.

Idols demand loyalty and sacrifices. We saw this, most hideously, in the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930's. Hitler pedaled a myth of the superiority of the Arian race, confident their manifest destiny was to shape the world in their image. Anyone who questioned the myth had to be silenced. And those who were "different" – Jews, gypsies, and others – suffered in the "holocaust," which means, literally, a burnt offering, offered to the gods.

## **2. When goods become Gods**

Let's be more practical. We talk about consumer "goods." Most are good, in moderation. "Good" food is good – but you don't want to overeat. "Good" clean fun is good – but you don't want your pleasures to become your obsessions. If we begin to think life is fulfilled through things or experiences money can buy, good becomes bad. When I'm depressed and I think the solution is a new video game, pair of shoes, or trip to Mexico, I'm in trouble. Money can't buy the full life Jesus promises. Contentment cannot be bought and sold.

When I was in Lebanon, an interfaith panel of religious leaders were discussing the challenges of passing on faith to younger generations. They identified the typical temptations of sex, drugs, and alcohol. They also named "consumerism" as one of the big challenges. They recognized that "stuff" – and the lure of "stuff" – leads people away from faith in God.

It was a revelation to me to hear people from a different cultural background, outside of western culture, name an "idol" we never even think about. Our modern economic system is predicated upon the premise that money can buy happiness. Advertisers sell us a lifestyle of fulfillment by buying more stuff. It's heresy to question the power of advertising or the need to buy more, get richer, and have more stuff. And so we make sacrifices ...

## **3. When goods enslave us ...**

The myth is we need more stuff, newer stuff, better stuff, then we'll be happy. Credit card companies offer us immediate gratification: why wait when you can put it on plastic. Mortgage companies offer delayed gratification – scrimp, sacrifice, save, and deny yourself any pleasure so you can afford the BIG house. So we work longer hours. We reward the workaholics. Dealing with the stress, we become chocoholics, food junkies, fashion addicts, computer gamers, not mentioning addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or ...

## **4. BUT ... the goods are not God**

Let's be honest: advertisers "sell" a package: confidence, relaxation, love, beauty, healthy, youth, status, comfort, peace, happy families, excitement, romance, serenity. We can buy all their stuff, but the gods of consumerism cannot deliver on their promises. They are not true

gods. All that stuff simply cannot deliver what it promises. We need something else. When we consciously or subconsciously measure our success by how much "stuff" we have, we distort God's intention for us. That's not who we were created to be.

## 5. Jesus is God

Let's talk about Jesus. Jesus comes to a nation (Israel) who really do think they are something special. Who really think they are God's elite. And who really think more stuff – a bigger army, more weapons, more wealth, and a more glorious capital city in Jerusalem – would make them all happy. And they will be happy when they are rich and powerful, lording it over the entire earth. After all, they are better than anyone else.

Jesus doesn't come with that agenda. He calls us all back to a true sense of what life is all about. In Jesus we discover a counter culture, a different way of living. Jesus teaches true greatness comes in putting oneself last, not first. It's found in humbling oneself to serve, not to be served. True contentment comes from loving God, and loving our neighbour. We gain our lives by losing them for others. Living in the image of God entails compassion, service, and willingness to engage in self-sacrificial love.

His values are quite different from those of our contemporary culture (read Isaiah 53:7-12). Jesus comes to serve and to suffer. Then, *"He will see the light of life and be satisfied ... Therefore I will give him a portion among the great."* A servant is not greater than his master. We are God's servants, today. Reread Isaiah 53:7-12. How do we feel about that?

Jesus calls his followers to pick up their cross and follow him, to travel simply when spreading His Word, and to let go of worldly concerns. But I'm surrounded by a culture that tells me my main motivation ought to be a nicer car, better clothes, larger house, and TV with more gadgets. Which vision/culture really brings satisfaction?

What can we learn from Jesus? From God? From His Word?

- a. ***In the Kingdom of God, we find fulfillment in loving relationships with God, other people, and the rest of creation.*** Worship of God, community with one another, and sustainable respect for God's creation come before profit. Every seventh year all debts were to be forgiven, and every 50<sup>th</sup> year every person was to receive back any property they had been forced to sell. Jesus promotes an economy of gift and sharing based on the recognition that all good comes from our generous God. We receive God's blessings; then we use those gifts to be a blessing to others.
- b. ***The Bible evaluates societies by how they care for the most destitute, those most in need.*** In biblical times this included widows, orphans, refugees, and those with illnesses from leprosy to demon possession. Jesus went out of His way to care for the neediest in society, restoring them to community. Christians sold their possessions so all people were adequately provided for. *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"* (James 1:27).

- c. ***The Bible teaches a lifestyle of "sufficiency."*** The modern expectation of ever increasing "stuff" is precisely that, a modern expectation. It's not how it has always been. It's not the biblical ideal. In the Bible, there is a goal that everyone has sufficient, not more and more. In fact, the goal of accumulating wealth for wealth's sake is disapproved as greed. The basic measure of a healthy community was that the most needy – the poor, widows, orphans, refugees, the sick, those mentally ill, the demon-possessed – were cared for so they, too, had sufficient. The Bible's classic picture of what a life with God ought to be like – and its picture of life with Jesus when His Kingdom is fully established is will look like one day, some day – is this: *"Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree"* (Micah 4:4). The question I ask myself again and again is, what is "sufficient." How can I live "sufficiently" without getting caught up in the drive for more and more and more?
- d. ***In the Kingdom, we worship God, not goods.*** What really matters? What really matters is Jesus. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, he was cut off from the land of the living ... why? He bore the sin of many and made intercession for transgressors. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus broke the power of sin and death so I can be forgiven, redeemed, and restored. So I am right with God again. So I can worship God again. So I can be free of idols. And so I can take up my true calling as God's child, God's beloved, God's creation, made in His image. This means:
- ***I do worship God, with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.*** I make sure He, and He alone guides my decision-making process. That sounds easy. It's actually very difficult to stand outside of politics, advertising, and culture. When I'm struggling I turn to Jesus, worship Him, and find my satisfaction in Him.
  - ***I do love my neighbour as myself.*** I value the people God has placed in my life. I make time for them. I take time with them. When I'm down, I go to them.
  - ***I value the gifts God has given me, and I give freely.*** I value the wonders of God's creation. I value the sunshine. I value the fresh air. I value the tangible gifts God has given and I offer them back to Him. I do care for those who do not have sufficient, and I discover it truly is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).
  - ***I'm not afraid to ask myself hard questions, like, "What is really important to me?"*** The questions I find myself asking more and more are not, "Can I afford it?" but "Do I really need it?" and "Can I live without it?" Do I need to change my relationship with stuff" taking only what we need and enjoying a "lighter," "slimmer" way of living? How can I live "sufficiently," generously, graciously, sacrificially, and lovingly? How do I live the culture of the Kingdom of God in Lethbridge in 2018? Can I even begin to distinguish the culture of God's Kingdom from the culture around me?
  - ***I will change how I live.*** What change will I make, today?