

Erroneous Exchange

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Date: 02 October 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray again. Let's ask God to help us understand his word. Heavenly Father Jeremiah says, the prophets prophesied by Baal.

But we pray that this morning, that is not what we will do. We pray that the word of the Lord will be proclaimed from this pulpit. We pray, Lord, that even though the word that was just read to us might sound confronting, Lord, we pray that you would allow it to do its work among us.

That you would help it to retain its cutting edge so that we might be cut to the hearts. But just as importantly, Lord, that we will find a healing balm there.

So we just commit this morning into your hands. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Well, this week I finally placed an order for a new laptop.

And I'm quite excited about that. My computer has been quite slow for a while now. Whenever it decides to auto-update, I can usually say goodbye to getting any work done for at least the next half an hour.

[1 : 1 0] So I'm definitely looking forward to getting this shiny new device. Now, let's say my new laptop arrives tomorrow. But when I open the box, I discover that the cover is stained, the screen is already cracked, and the keyboard is missing a couple of buttons.

Despite that, I somehow still dare to switch it on. And as it boots up, what's this? Not even Windows 95, but Windows 3.1.

And the display is CGA, which means I only get four colors at 320x200 resolution. What do you think will be the first thing I'll do? I'll be on the phone straight away demanding a replacement. The whole point of my purchase is to exchange something inferior for something superior. I'm definitely not accepting this horrible product. And I'll be fighting to exchange it for something much better.

And that's common sense, isn't it? That's just what we do. If we have something bad, we'll like to exchange it for something good.

[2 : 2 4] If we have repeatedly bad experiences with a particular car, then we'll swap it next time for a different model. If a football club has a consistently below-performing player, they try to swap them out for someone hopefully better.

We want the good thing, not the bad thing. And the Bible knows that's how we are wired. And that's why it wants to show us something significant about sin today.

It wants you to know that whenever you sin against God, you are in effect doing the opposite. You are exchanging something good for something bad.

You are trading in that shiny new laptop for a completely rubbish one. So today, God says, I want to expose that dodgy transaction you are making.

If over the last two weeks I've already exposed sin as a false faith, as a scammer who gets us believing lies instead of truth, if I've already exposed sin as a spiral of shame, trapping us further and further into patterns of destructive behaviour, this morning I want to unmask sin as an erroneous exchange.

[3 : 5 1] And the degree to which you see sin unmask as such is the degree to which you weren't indulged in it.

So this morning, we'll approach this using a question and answer format, a little bit like last week. And the first question we'll ask this morning is this.

What is the core exchange that lies at the heart of our sin? Well, let's find out. Turn with me to Jeremiah 2 verse 11, and there we'll find our answer.

Has a nation ever changed its gods? Yet they are not gods at all. But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols.

So there you have it. On the one side, you have the supreme, majestic, almighty, loving God. And on the other side, we have idols.

[4 : 56] Now, what is an idol? Simply put, an idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as a substitute for God.

So it's something that comes from within our world, not outside it, that we think is equal to or better than God. Think of the many nations in the Old Testament.

Who did they worship? Well, later on, Jeremiah 8 verse 2 talks about those who consulted and worshipped the sun and the moon. Similarly, Amos 5 verse 26 talks about those who elevate the stars to be gods of some kind.

So they worshipped something within creation as something more glorious than the Creator. And that's what an idol is.

They are not gods at all, Jeremiah says, but we treat them as such. And often, it is this exchange that lies behind instances of sinful behaviour.

[6 : 08] You see, sin isn't merely about doing wrong things or even about just false beliefs. More fundamentally, it is about the choice to give our hearts fully to anything other than God.

It's what we're talking about whenever we use that word, idolatry. And idolatry is one of the Bible's key images for sin.

But here's the second question. Okay, pastor, so sin is about exchanging God for an idol. But why should I worry about this exchange?

That's not a danger for me. In our modern scientific age, what makes you think that I have ever worshipped or will ever worshipped big balls of gas above God?

Well, that really is a ridiculous error. Well, here's the scary part. The Bible says, no. Actually, we are all capable of making such an exchange, of swapping the Creator for a piece of creation.

[7 : 25] If it's not the star or the moon, it's something else. If you're not sure about that, Jeremiah says, then let me walk you down memory lane.

Let me take you back to the days when you were still in the first flush of your full earth. Now, I know some of you have known Christ for many years now, but think back to your early days of being Christian.

Weren't you spiritually hungry then? Weren't you so in love with Jesus? I remember my early days when I would read the book of Acts repeatedly.

I'll repeatedly sing to myself that old Hillsong chorus. You might know it. So close, I believe. You're holding me now. In your hands I belong. You never let me go. And that is what Jeremiah reminds his hearers of.

Come back with me to verse 2. This is what the Lord says. I remember the devotion of your youth. How as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.

[8 : 39] You see, it all started so well for Israel. God and his people enjoyed a fairytale marriage, as it were. There was Israel gazing lovingly at the Lord's beauty, slipping their hand into God's hands, following wherever he took them.

And there was God, in verse 3, making sure to protect his precious people, those whom he had committed exclusively to.

It was going so well. It felt like nothing would ever disrupt their relationship. And perhaps you feel similarly, like nothing could ever take your heart away from God.

But look what happened next, verses 4 and 5. Hear the word of the Lord, you descendants of Jacob, all you clans of Israel.

This is what the Lord says. What fault did your ancestors find in me that they strayed so far from me? Can you see what has happened?

[9 : 49] The people who once loved God have now left God. And can you hear the Lord's pain? Not just in this verse, but throughout the entire chapter, which our brother Yap brought out so well in his reading.

He's asking, what defect could you possibly have found in me to make you go away? I've done no wrong to you, but why have you wandered from me?

The other day, I was reading one of those relationship advice columns in the newspaper, and a guy had written in to say, I have a good marriage, I'm happy with my wife, I love my kids, but my colleague is also amazing, and I'm thinking of starting an affair with her.

What do you think? No surprise, the columnist wrote back to basically saying, are you so stupid? Why do you want to throw away all of that for something so, well, heb-bel?

That's basically what God is saying in verse 5. You see, that word, worthless, is really that Hebrew word again. Heb-bel.

[11:06] Feeding. Frustrating. So, why do you, as the NASB version puts it so well, choose to walk after emptiness and become empty?

It doesn't make sense. But Jeremiah shows us all of us can abandon our first love. See what the word of the Lord says down in verse 32.

Does a young woman forget her jewelry? A bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number. And this swap reminds us, doesn't it, that in the end, sin is never just the breaking of abstract laws.

Sin is really the violation of a relationship. It is a violation of love because it gives the love that belongs to God alone to something or someone else.

It's as if we have given our wedding ring over to our mistress. And it's something we do more often than we think. And that's why we shouldn't dismiss the threat of idolatry.

[12:28] You see, we might not give our hearts to the sun or the moon today or to gods with names like Baal or Dagon. But our hearts are prone to become over-attached to something within creation.

We are prone to take something valuable like family or friendships or work or even money itself and so inflate its worth that we are willing to exchange God for it.

It's that thing where we say, I must have it whatever it might be. Otherwise, life has no meaning. Life is not worth living.

So even now, it's good to ask yourself, is there a thing like that in my life today? Is there a thing that I say, I must have other than God himself?

and do I feel angry or hopeless if I don't have that thing? Well, that will help you begin to identify what might be that thing that you're willing to exchange even the living God for.

[13:49] But this prompts our third question. Why might we be motivated to make this exchange? Why do we do it? Well, at its heart, it must be because we believe we're exchanging something bad for something good.

Remember, that's how we are wired. We only exchange what we think is bad for what we think is good. So what did the people in Jeremiah's day think they were exchanging?

Well, the clue seems to be in how the people speak to God. Look at how God describes them in verse 20, for example. Long ago, you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds and you said, I will not serve you.

We will not serve you. That's the cry of the people. We don't want this yoke that binds us to you, Lord. Or come down with me to the second half of verse 31.

We are free to roam. We will come to you no more. That's what they said. So it's clear, isn't it, that they believe they were exchanging slavery for freedom?

[15:13] They think they are making a good trade-off. Should they come to God? Should they stay within God's ways? Should they remain faithful to God's covenant?

they believe they will be trapped, oppressed, burdened, exploited, but move away from God.

Go somewhere else and they'll be liberated, unchained, set free, free to roam. And that's why they are willing to exchange God for something else.

They think they are getting something good in place of something bad. But is that right? In verse 14, the Lord asks rhetorically, is Israel a servant, a slave by birth?

The answer is, of course not. God has already described his people as his bride. But when we think God is bad, when we become convinced that other things are better than he is, we will become more than willing to swap out God for a substitute.

[16:32] We believe that substitute, whatever it might be, can give us what God can't give. You see, idols are constantly making promises.

In the Old Testament, fertility gods promised the birth of children. Weather gods promised good conditions for abundant crops.

Warrior gods promised protection from enemies and victory in battle. Today, the God of money promises you that you will never feel anxious again, that you can have more control over where you live and which schools you can send your kids to and what kind of holidays you can take.

The God of success promises you that you will be loved and respected by all around you or that you can gain power or influence over others.

That is the key feature of idolatry. love love comfort security freedom protection worth which God won't give you.

[17 : 51] And when we believe that, we make the exchange. When we believe these things can deliver us from the other things we fear like loneliness, being looked down on, contempt, perhaps even pity, we will invest our hopes in these idols.

It's why in verse 18 we discover that Israel has formed alliances with Egypt and Assyria. They believe these were the people who would grant them true security and protection.

So they showed the middle finger to God and hopped in bed with these godless nations. But this brings us to our fourth question which I regard in some ways as the key question this morning.

What are the results of making this exchange? Well let me tell you straight away that the answer is nothing good. And this will be key to how we can battle idolatry.

You see if we can unmask sin as an exchange where we are actually trading something good for something bad rather than the opposite then we will be less willing to make that exchange.

[19 : 24] So let's find out what are some of the bad results of making this exchange. Well first of all we will be disappointed by our idols.

This is what lies behind what is perhaps the most striking image of Jeremiah chapter 2. Look at verse 13. So the idea is this.

Just imagine that you've been hiking on an incredibly hot day 40 degrees Celsius or just imagine that you've been on the badminton court for two hours straight pretending to be Zijia.

Now what will you be craving for? Well we all know what we want by that point don't we? Water.

And God is like that cold water on a hot day or that hundred plus after an intense badminton session.

And just imagine if that spring of living water is right in front of you offering refreshment like no other. You don't have to do anything other than just to cricket.

[20 : 55] But just imagine that although it's right in front of you, you decide that actually you need to go digging in the mud or you need to go to the longgang for an alternative source of refreshment.

And when you see some sewage water there, you say, guys, guys, guys, come here, come here, look what I found. This is amazing. We can quench our thirst with this. Well, never mind the spring that's right there. It sounds so stupid, doesn't it?

But that's what the Bible says we are doing whenever we go to our man-made idols instead of God. We say no to the spring of living water right in front of us.

Instead, we end up digging our own cisterns. Now, those are basically tanks for storing water like a well, in case you don't know what a cistern is.

And we build them, trying to catch whatever limited rain might fall. But in the end, no matter how much rain comes, it's no use because these cisterns have cracks in them and can't hold any water.

[22 : 10] And even if it did, remember the water in these cisterns have no outlet. It just sits there, becoming more contaminated day by day.

So, no surprise that when we drink and bathe in this water, we find it a total letdown. And Jeremiah says, that's what happens when you forsake God, verses 17 and 19.

So, verse 18, why go to Egypt to drink from their waters? Or Assyria to drink from their rivers?

Or more straightforwardly, in verse 36, why do you go about so much changing your ways? You will be disappointed by Egypt as you were with Assyria.

you will find there are nothing more than broken cisterns. You will find that the sacrifices you made on their behalf will ultimately be all for nothing.

[23 : 19] And he's right, isn't he? In verses 14 and 15, we see that Israel has become plunder for other nations, that their land has been laid to waste.

These nations offered them no protection, in the end. And in the end, all that remains of the glories of Egypt and Assyria sit today in history museums.

And today, we can just replace the words Egypt and Assyria with any number of other things. If you put your pleasure or your convenience or your culture above God, you will eventually be disappointed by them.

If, as in verse 27, you say to your job or to your career or to any other idol, you are my father, and you cry out to them when you are in trouble, come and save us, you will find they do no such thing.

Verse 28, that's how idols work. They just make you empty rather than fill you up. That's why Jeremiah keeps calling these idols worthless.

[24 : 40] It's why in verse 12, he says, such an exchange is totally appalling. You're exchanging something amazing for something terrible. And God knows that.

That's why he's looking to stop you. Matt Papa is one of the guys who wrote that song, Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery, and I think he also co-wrote the new song we sang.

And he once said this, God knows that anything we love more than him will betray us. And that's why God wants us to stop from making that exchange so that we don't have to undergo that experience of devastating betrayal.

Second of all, we will be deformed by our idols. Now, come back with me to verse 5, and let's pay closer attention to what Jeremiah says.

They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. Now, we already know that these idols are in the end useless.

[25 : 57] they couldn't, like God did in verse 6, bring his people out of Egypt and lead them through the wilderness to an incredible land. But, they are capable of doing something else.

They are capable of making all those who pursue them just like them. God. That's the logic of verse 5.

Those who follow worthless idols become worthless themselves. You see, when we truly worship God, we become more like him.

That's what 2 Corinthians 3.18 says. As we behold the Lord's glory, we become transformed into his image. But, the other side of the coin is true too.

We also become like the idols we worship. Now, this is made even clearer in Psalm 115, verses 4 to 8. But, their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands.

[27 : 07] Their mouths cannot speak, eyes cannot see, their ears cannot hear, their noses cannot smell, their hands cannot feel, feet cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats, and this is the key verse, those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

Do you see that's what the Bible teaches? We take on the characteristics of what we worship. Think of the teenager who hero worships a certain person, a pop or sports star perhaps, or a certain mentor.

Now, what usually happens? They begin to adopt the same language as their hero. They share the same attitudes. They might even dress just like them.

So it is with idols. If we make sex our idol, we become lustful and unrestrained, unable to treat people other than as objects of gratification.

if we make personal independence our idol, we become hyper-individualistic, unable to make any decisions that are in the best interest of others rather than myself.

[28 : 28] The point is, if we worship anything other than God, it will inevitably make us lesser than what we were created to be. It will not make us more kind, more loving, more humble, more patient in any way.

And we see this happening in 2 Timothy 3, 1-5 as well. So if you don't mind, let's just leave Jeremiah 2 for a minute and just turn with me to 2 Timothy 3, 1-5.

And at first glance, when you look at it, these verses might look like just a random list of vices. But Paul actually structures these verses in a very intentional way.

Notice that he begins by describing people as lovers of self and of money. That's verse 1. And notice that he ends this list by saying, verse 5, they are not lovers of God.

So in other words, they have performed precisely the exchange spoken about in Jeremiah 2. they have exchanged God for the idol of self.

[29 : 43] And so what is the result? Well, their character becomes deformed. Look at verses 2 and 4. They become boastful, proud, abusive, treacherous, rash, abusive.

And because their character is deformed, well, this naturally manifests itself in sinful actions, such as those listed in verse 3. Loveless, unforgiving, being slanderous and without self-control, and so on.

And so this list helps us see what idols do to us. They disappoint us, they deform us, and then they disorder us.

That's the third result that I want to talk about. Third of all, our loves will be disordered by our idols. Now, I wonder as you heard Jeremiah 2 being read earlier, if you noticed some of the absolutely

shocking language that Jeremiah uses.

In verse 20, for example, God's people are described as a prostitute who goes to every tree and hill to be sexually promiscuous. In verses 23 and 24, the prophet compares idolaters to female animals in heat, restless, over-eager, happy to mate with anyone they can find.

[31 : 13] They cannot restrain themselves. So much so, verse 25, they say, it's no use. I love foreign gods, and I must go after them. So what is happening?

Well, verse 33 gives us a clue. Jeremiah says, how skilled you are at pursuing love. And he gives us an insight into the human condition there.

And here I also want to draw on some insights from some of our best Christian philosophers and theologians. You see, as a number of them have noticed over the centuries, we are actually wired for love.

We are made to receive and to give love. We naturally pursue it. At the core of our being, we are not just thinking creatures or social animals.

We are fundamentally lovers. For just as two weeks ago, when I said that the question is not so much whether we believe, but what or who we believe in, so it is with love.

[32 : 31] The question is not so much whether we love, but what or who we love. As the Christian philosopher Jamie Smith puts it, even sin cannot switch off the love pump that is at the heart of our being.

So that's why we are always pursuing love. But what sin does is to misdirect our love and get it aimed at the wrong things.

It's why we go looking for love in the wrong places, as Israel does here. They look for love in foreign gods. And what idols do is disorder our loves.

Now, this is where the ancient theologian Augustine can be so helpful. You see, he said, we can only have three kinds of relationships in this world. We have relationships to things, we have relationships with other people, and we have relationships with God.

And we are meant to use things, love people, and worship God. Let me say that again. We are meant to use things, love people, and worship God.

[33 : 50] But the essence of sin is when we confuse how we should relate to things, people, and God. The essence of sin is what he calls disordered loves. So, for example, anytime we start loving things more than people, that's a disordered love.

Or anytime we start worshipping people and using God, that's a disordered love. You see, the issue is not that created things are bad.

The issue is when we relate to them wrongly, and treat created things less as windows into God's goodness and God's glory, but as things which can give us ultimate satisfaction.

In other words, we are back to idolatry. And Augustine says that will never work, because what we have is an infinite thirst trying to find satisfaction in finite sources.

And with that, let's come to our final question for today. What can I do today to keep us from making this erroneous exchange?

[35 : 07] Well, one thing which I've hopefully managed to do somewhat already, is simply to unmask sin for what it is. That should make us more hesitant to go the way of sin when we see that it is an exchange that brings us zero benefits.

But what else can we do? Well, as we finish, let me make three suggestions. Number one, be mindful of what can make you lose your first love.

In the end, fighting sin is really a matter of fighting to let Jesus remain our first love, isn't it? For if Jesus remains our first love, we will never make this exchange.

So, to protect ourselves, it's good to ask, what can potentially take us away from our first love?

Well, let me just pinpoint one thing today.

Rather ironically, one thing that can take us away is Christian activity. You see, sometimes we might get passionate about a particular ministry, music ministry, social concerns, whatever it is, or sometimes we might get passionate about a certain cause, maybe the need to defend Christian values in our society or something like that.

[36 : 35] Now, those ministries and those causes are not bad in themselves, but sometimes, without realizing it, we become more passionate about those things than about Jesus himself.

In Jeremiah's day, in 2 verse 8, we discover that the priest did not ask, where is the Lord? They still went about their duties.

They dealt with the law, verse 8 tells us. There was still worship happening at the temple, Jeremiah 7 will tell us later. But they never asked, where is God in all this?

They took no interest to keep deepening their knowledge of God. As a result, their love for God soon grew cold, and they forgot him despite their religious activity, and in fact, more than that, they turned away from him.

And so the flip side of that is to keep our love for Jesus hot. That's number two. According to the pastor Graham Bannon, thinking badly of God is the breathing place of idolatry.

[37 : 48] It's like a marriage where negative thoughts about your spouse means you start looking at other people with a different eye, and you begin to wonder what life would be like with them instead.

And because of your negative thoughts about your actual spouse, someone else might compare favourably. And so that means we need to be constantly reminded of how good Jesus is.

So let's remind one another again. Let's remind each other that this Jesus, though he was the creator, though he was in very nature God, did not consider that something to be used to his own advantage.

Instead, he came in the bodily form of a creature as he took on the nature of a servant. And he too performed an exchange, but this was no erroneous exchange.

This was the greatest exchange in history. As he who knew no sin became a sin offering in our place to win us true freedom.

[38 : 58] This is the same Jesus who declared in John 7, 37, let anyone who is thirsty come to me to drink.

He knows our need, every single one of us. And he knows that we, without exception, are thirsty. And he meets our need as the spring of living water.

Now, he is no broken system. He is the one who leads us through our deserts and our droughts into a fertile and fruitful land.

come to him. And number three, let him rightly order our words, our loves. That's probably a better way of putting it than what I put on your outline.

Let him rightly order our loves. But let's remember what Augustine taught us. Remember, the problem isn't that we love. The problem is how we relate to other things and the proportion of our love.

[40 : 04] when we love things too much and God too little. The problem isn't the creation. Creation is good, family is good, work is good. The problem is when we become over-attached to creation at the expense of God.

So sometimes as you ponder your struggles, it might be good to pay attention to your emotions. If we feel very strongly about something, it might be good to ask ourselves, why? And am I loving the right things in their proportion?

Or have my loves become disordered? Is that why I'm not exchanging the Creator for created things? And as you and I ponder that, let's also use that as an opportunity to come to Jesus again and see why we love Him above everything else.

He alone can save us. He alone is love. He alone can reorient our loves. There is nothing better in this world that we could ever exchange Jesus for.

And the good news is we already have Him as He has given Himself to us. So don't let Him go.

[41 : 25] Fight to keep Him our first love. And everything else will take care of itself. Let's pray.

Father, as we ponder Your Word this morning, we come to You confessing that sometimes we have become attached to something in the creation at the expense of You, our Creator.

sometimes we have followed worthless idols and so have brought worthlessness upon ourselves.

But Father, thank You that we can turn back to You, so please help us to turn back to You now.

Help us not to exchange gods for You, but help us to come back to You, to put our trust in You, to put our hope in You.

And we ask humbly, Lord, that You will continue to change our hearts so that we might keep doing this all the days of our lives into eternity. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.