

Text: Genesis 31:17-55

Title: "Gods that Can Be Stolen Away"

Time: 3/8/09 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Charles Bradlaugh was a 19th century British atheist who was elected to Parliament from Northampton, but not allowed to take his seat there for his refusal to recite the constitutional oath to God for that position. His battle lasted for a number of election cycles, with the people of Northampton repeatedly sending him back to Parliament, where he was not allowed to take his seat. Finally, Bradlaugh was allowed to take his seat with a general affirmation rather than an oath to God, and he later was instrumental in leading England to adopt a law that made room for this kind of exception.

1880 was the year Bradlaugh was first elected to Parliament. The June 1, 1880 edition of *The New York Times* carried a story about a libel suit that Bradlaugh had brought against a newspaper called *The British Empire* for a story they had printed about him.

During the trial, the defense called a witness named Richard Budge, who claimed to have heard a lecture from Bradlaugh years prior that supported the newspaper's story about him. In his testimony, Brudge explained: "The lecturer, whom everybody spoke of as Charles Bradlaugh, said: 'I am going to say something now that many of you may hardly believe. I am going to show you that there is no God. If there is a God, I challenge Him to strike me dead in five minutes.' The lecturer then took out a watch and held it up. When the five minutes had passed, Bradlaugh said: 'There, now, you see that there is no God who has any power over me.'"

Bradlaugh denied ever saying this, and this is why he brought the suit against the newspaper. But *The New York Times* noted that Brudge's testimony was difficult for the prosecution to overcome. Clearly, whether or not Bradlaugh said it, that is a poor way to determine whether or not the God of the Bible exists. It is a good way to determine whether or not such a god exists, who happens to be powerful enough and desirous enough to kill an atheist in that particular five minutes, but the procedure does little to demonstrate anything about the God of the Bible.

There is plenty of evidence for atheism when it comes to faith in the gods that man has made for himself. While these objects of worship may indeed exist; it is easy to demonstrate that they are not gods at all. Our passage does exactly this by showing that many of the things that man treats as his god are not actually gods at all because they can be stolen away.

If you can steal something, that thing is not a god worthy of your worship. The theme of stealing recurs throughout our passage (vv. 19, 20, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 39), and in most cases what is being stolen is something that someone is worshipping. The most obvious example of this, of course, are the household gods that Rachel stole in v. 19. Rachel not only steals these gods, she later sits on them (v. 34).

One quickly comes to the conclusion here that a god that can be stolen and sat upon is really no God at all, certainly not something worthy of our worship, as is the true God of the Bible. I want us to see this morning the inadequacy of the "gods that can be stolen away," and I want us to examine our lives to see whether or not these things have stolen from us the allegiance and worship only the true God is due from us.

I. Money is a god that can be stolen away (vv. 17-18, 20-24, 36-43a).

Illustration: Our nation's economy is in a good deal of turmoil right now, and it all seems to have begun with what is called the sub-prime mortgage crisis fueled by the lending practices of the government-sponsored entities, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. In 2001 an economist named Peter J. Wallison wrote a book about Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac entitled, *Serving Two Masters Yet Out of Control*. The back cover of the book summarizes its theme as follows:

"Because two disparate — almost diametrically opposite — clients demand loyalty from Freddie Mae and Fannie Mac, these government sponsored entities must fulfill two ultimately irreconcilable roles." The paragraph explains that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac have to serve both shareholders and the government, and then it says: "Thus while attempting to serve two masters, Fannie and Freddie are literally out of control." No one in Congress heeded advice like this, and as a result we are in the mess we are in today.

It was, of course, our Lord who first spoke of two masters when it comes to money: "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24). Clearly, money is one of the unworthy gods that competes for the devotion we ought only give to the true God, the God of the Bible. I want us to see three principles for keeping money at bay, for not letting it become a god we worship.

1. Do not take what you have not earned. The text makes a big deal about the fact that Jacob left with all that was truly his, all that he had acquired (vv. 17-18). He could openly

show that he had not stolen anything that he had not earned (vv. 36-37). We should not steal from others or take from others, even if the government is encouraging us to do so with welfare programs.

2. Let your relationship to God regulate your relationship to money, not vice versa. Jacob shows incredibly disciplined honesty in his financial dealings with Laban, practices that are above reproach. He took great care to keep the animals from miscarriages; he refused the occasional lamb chops that would have been customarily due the shepherds; he bore the loss of animals attacked by wild beasts himself; and he worked hard for twenty years in the face of corruption and cheating. How does someone do that? He lets his relationship with God define his business dealings. He does not let his business dealings put limitations on how godly he can be. And so God honored this commitment (v. 42).

3. Learn to be content in times of financial distress. Laban could not do this because money was his god, not Yahweh (31:2, 43). It could not provide him with a contented life, because it could be stolen away. If you have been in the stock market recently, you know what it is to have your life savings stolen away.

Can we still be content under these circumstances as cruel as they are? Yes, if we heed the counsel of our Lord, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-20).

The word translated *bare the loss of it* in v. 39 is a form of the normal Hebrew word for sin, meaning *to miss*; it is a form

that expresses especially the removal of a miss or the removal of a sin. In every other passage of the Old Testament where this form of this word is used, God's Word discusses the removal of sin from the heart, or the Bible doctrine of expiation. Ps. 51:7 is an important example of this: "*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.*" *Purge* means *remove*. Hyssop refers to the sprinkling of the blood – there was a price to pay for the removal of the shortcoming of sin.

Jacob's use of the term provides a wonderful illustration of what Christ's work has done for us to remove our sin. Jacob had to bear the cost of the lost sheep in order to remove the impact of the lost animal to Laban's balance sheet. In the same way, Christ had to bear the cost of our sin in order to cleanse us from that sin. This is why David says, "*Purge me with hyssop,*" and why John says that it is the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from our sin. He bore the cost that we deserved to pay, and this wipes our account and our heart clean.

II. Family is a god that can be stolen away (vv. 25-29, 43).

Application: We do not have time to dwell long on this point, nor is it a major emphasis of the chapter, but it is here. Laban is very upset about losing his family. He hears directly from the true God that it is time for Jacob to go (v. 24), and yet he puts his love for his family above his love for God's will. He wants them to stay.

When allegiance to family becomes greater than our allegiance to Christ, Christ tells us that we are not worthy to be called His disciples. On one occasion Jesus said to a large crowd following him, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." That is no way to build a crowd, is it? It is

the way Christ builds disciples though. He wants us to love Him so much that our love for the people most precious to us on the earth can look like hatred and neglect. Don't let allegiance to family (or that girl you are dating who is not yet family) become more important to you than your allegiance to God. Only God is worthy of first place.

III. Flexible religion is a god that can be stolen away (vv. 19, 30-35, 53).

Application: You may say, "Pastor, I did not see the words 'flexible religion' in anything you just read." And you are right, so I have some explaining to do. The gods that Rachel stole from Laban were called *teraphim*, and where we see teraphim in the Old Testament we see flexible religion, religious practices customized to the whims and wants of the worshipper rather than a true religion dictated by God's law for all to follow. Look with me at Judg. 17:5, 14, 17, 18, 20. Micah used teraphim to create his own approach to worshiping God. This kind of flexible-religion substitute for the worship of the true God is popular today.

Illustration: On Monday night, June 4, 2007, CNN and the liberal evangelical group Sojourners sponsored a forum of Democratic presidential candidates on faith at George Washington University. The discussion was designed to attract evangelical religious voters back to the Democratic party.

Then frontrunner Hillary Clinton said in part, "I come from a tradition that is perhaps a little too suspicious of people who wear their faith on their sleeves. A lot of the talk about and advertising about faith doesn't come naturally to me. It is something that, you know, I keep thinking of the Pharisees and all of the Sunday school lessons and readings that

I had as a child. But I think your faith guides you every day; certainly mine does. But at those moments in time when you're tested, it is absolutely essential that you be grounded in your faith."

Application: Mrs. Clinton has a very flexible view of religion. To her, faith is something that is customized from person to person, something that works for you in a way that is different from me. This is a man-made faith. Flexible, different from person-to-person religion is man-made religion. Flexible religion is never "worn on the sleeve," so as not to impose the terms of my religion on you where they may not apply.

Yet the Bible is clear that the terms of the worship of the true God of the Bible are the same for everyone. Clinton's theology mirrors Laban's theology, not Jacob's (v. 53, note that the word *judge* is plural, so the God of Abraham is not the same as the god of Nahor, who is probably not the same as the god of their father, in Laban's view). Have you gone about to figure out your own way to worship God, or are you daily seeking to know His expectations for your life in His Word, the same Word everyone else has to read, so that you can obey Him? Watch out, lest the temptation to create your own flexible religion steals your heart away from the worship of the one true God.

IV. The true God sits in the watchtower; He sees all that is stolen away (vv. 44-55).

Application: The names of the memorial are significant here – *mound of witness*. *Mizpah* means *watchtower* (see 2 Chron. 20:24). Ultimately, Laban suffers the consequences of idolatry. He sets up this monument between himself and Jacob and gives lip service to putting God in a watchtower,

but what he misses is the fact that God has been in the watchtower all along. We never fool God when we live with an allegiance to things instead of Him. Laban uses the whole covenant/monument episode to take yet another stab at his godly son-in-law (v. 50).

Conclusion: Jacob used the opportunity to remind Laban that his God was not just any God, the invention of man or the work of his imagination. His God was the true God, the Feared One of Isaac. He has always been in the watchtower weighing the hearts of man. He is weighing your heart and mine today. Does he find there that our true allegiances are His, or can see a heart full of gods who can be stolen away? If the Holy Spirit has told you that it is the later, remember that because of Christ we have access to the expiation of sin. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. May that work enthrone the only true God within our hearts today.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*