

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on May 28, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb on Judges 6:25-32.

**Series: Ordinary People – Extraordinary God (Gideon)**

**Today's Focus: Gideon's Gambit**

**"The Fuss About the Plus"**

A couple years ago Sarah and I got to attend a Sunday Night Football game at Lambeau Field in Green Bay. The stadium was filled with fans wearing green and gold. Our section was entirely full of Packers fans until right before kickoff...in the empty bleacher row right in front of us...4 heavy set Bears fans came swaggering in wearing their team colors and jerseys and sat down. And you know what happened? No one in our section of Packers fans said, "Welcome friends, we're glad you're here because if our defense isn't playing well today, we hope that yours will pick up the slack." Nobody said, "Welcome neighbors. We hope if our quarterback is having an off day that then yours will be on fire and light up the scoreboard."

It was as if the Packers fans sitting around us felt you couldn't cheer for both Packers players and Bears players at the same time. Amazing, isn't it!? ... Any Packers fans in the room? Let me ask you this. Are any of you fans of both the Packers *plus* the Bears? How about this...are any of you fans of the Packers *plus* the Bears *plus* the Vikings *plus* the Lions? Now I'm really talking in absurdities, aren't I? You can't really claim allegiance to one team and then cheer for all the others just to sort of have all your bases covered. It doesn't work like that.

Yet that's kind of what was going on in Gideon's day when it came to God. In Israel where Gideon lived there were plenty of people who still worshipped God—that is, the LORD, the one true God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, who miraculously brought them across the Red Sea out from slavery in Egypt and led them into the land where they now lived. There were still people who worshipped the LORD as their God. But just in case the LORD wasn't going to actually keep coming through for them in the clutch... they also worshipped other gods. In other words it was *God +*. God + the false gods of the nations around them. This is what was happening in the days of Gideon.

Remember him? Last week we were introduced to Gideon. He was an Israelite who lived about 3,000 years ago. During Gideon's time a coalition of desert people led by the Midianites came and invaded the land where the Israelites lived—every year for 7 years straight. Pastor Bill said last week that being an Israelite during this time would be like if you filled up your shopping cart at the grocery store, paid for all your food in the checkout lane, and then went out into the parking lot only to have your cart stolen by thugs. So these were dark and perilous times for the Israelites. They were impoverished, terrorized, and starving. The Midianites were a big-time problem, no doubt about it. But there was an even bigger problem in Israel to deal with. See if you can tell what it was...

**<sup>25</sup> That same night the LORD said to him [Gideon], "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.**

**<sup>26</sup> Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."**

So did you figure out what could possibly be a bigger problem than the Midianites? ... How about worshipping idols!? Remember we heard last week that God had told Gideon that he was sending him to rescue the Israelites from the hand of Midian. Gideon then built an altar to the LORD and named it "The LORD is peace." And rightly so. What a beautiful response to God's grace! But not everyone was fully on board yet. Because as we just heard, Gideon's own father had set up a prominent altar in order to worship Baal, the Canaanite rainstorm god, and a pornographic Asherah pole was set up alongside it. Maybe Gideon and his family still worshiped the LORD as God but if so it was more like God+. God + idols.

And of course they should've known better! Through Moses, God had warned them: <sup>12</sup> **Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.** <sup>13</sup> **Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.** <sup>14</sup> **Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God** (Exodus 34:12-14). So it's not like Gideon's father could say, "Oops, I guess I just misunderstood what God wanted us to do. My bad, everybody." It was crystal clear. God commanded them to break down those altars to Baal, not build them! Oops indeed. But now the real problem was that nobody was making *a fuss about the plus*, i.e. God + idols. Idolatry was normalized. Everyone was doing it. Gideon's own family had blatantly set up an altar to false gods. Worshiping them was destroying their relationship with the LORD and putting the salvation of their souls in severe jeopardy.

At least nobody would be so foolish as to do something like that today, right? Nobody would be so foolish as to pursue something that would destroy their soul, right? Not. So. Fast. The problem is we just don't always see our idols because we've normalized them. On the one hand, many have adopted an Old Country Buffet style approach to religion. A little of this. A little of that. Whatever looks good, sounds good, feels good to you. Believe whatever. Or else we've Americanized our idols. We've said, "We want our idols and we don't want anyone to try and take them away from us." Check this out...

In his recent book "Making Sense of God" author Tim Keller quotes postmodern novelist David Foster Wallace who is an atheist. Yet here's his observation. *"In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as...not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough...Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you...Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out"* (p. 111).

Friends, recognize any of your own idols in those words? Or can you think of any others that you've set up in your life? Anything your family has been pursuing that you've stopped even seeing as sinful and self-destructive because you've normalized worshipping your idols? This would be a great Memorial Day weekend conversation over your cookout, wouldn't it? Ask your family and friends, "Do you see where we should be making *a fuss about the plus?*"

And then what do you do when you discover the altar that you've set up to the various false gods in your life? Find a better way to fit them all in? Figure out how to manage them better, God+? No, you need to do what God told Gideon to do. *Make a fuss about the plus: Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.* <sup>26</sup> **Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height.**

What does it mean to make *a fuss about the plus*? It means to repent and redirect your worship to GOD! Tear down your idols before God takes them away. Want to find your idols? Ask yourself this question... What do I have that if it were suddenly taken away from me would cause me to get angry and shake my fist at God? Because listen to the rest of this story...

<sup>27</sup> **So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.** (Now I suppose we could be critical of Gideon for being afraid but, I mean, at least he obeyed God. God didn't tell him he had to do it during the day and by taking 10 other people he made it pretty clear that he was going public with this confession of faith in the one true God. So I'm going to cut him some slack because at least he finally did something about the idol worship in his family!)

<sup>28</sup> **In the morning when the people of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar!** <sup>29</sup> **They asked each other, "Who did this?" When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."** <sup>30</sup> **The people of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."**

<sup>31</sup> **But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar."** <sup>32</sup> **So because Gideon broke down Baal's altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal that day, saying, "Let Baal contend with him."**

Interesting. How did the people react when their idols were destroyed? They were furious. **"Who did this?...He must die!"** Wow. How emotionally invested we can feel in our idols when they're about to be destroyed! Defensive to the extreme. So what's the big deal? So why does God make *a fuss about the plus*? Why does Moses tell us: **Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.** Oprah Winfrey once said this is why she stopped worshipping God. She said it was because she simply couldn't worship a God who says he is jealous for her.

Is this a problem? Well, only when we sinful humans project our deficiencies on God. But he isn't like us. God is absolutely pure and holy, perfectly flawless. We are not. We are sinners. And because of sin, jealousy for us ends up being more like coveting. Where we greedily want something because we think we need *that* to be happy and so we get afraid if *that* is ever threatened and angry if *that* is ever taken away for us because we lose sight of the fact that God made us to find happiness only in loving relationship with him. So when God says he is jealous for us it's really due to his love and infinitely perfect wisdom of what he knows is best for us.

The Triune God wants to be your only God because he is your only God! And because he is a God who is exclusively loyal to you. Friends, no other gods can ultimately help you. No idols can ultimately provide you with the happiness, contentment, affirmation, or security that you crave. Every false god that you pursue will ultimately let you down and destroy you. God is jealous for you because he wants to keep you from wasting your time and efforts pursuing those things which will in the end only hurt you.

And because he is the only one who can actually help you especially when it comes to your greatest problem. You know what that is by now, right? **“The wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). Despite all the money in the world we cannot pay for the guilt of our sins. Despite all the technology in the world we cannot keep ourselves alive. The curse of sin will catch up with us all sooner or later. We will all die. You see the problem here? The Israelites needed to see that their problem wasn’t just the Midianites who were oppressing them. Their biggest problem was their own idolatry that was separating them from God—their only true Savior!

So why *the fuss about the plus*? Finally, it’s because of this. It is only the LORD your God who, despite your sins, made a fuss about you. Only God cares so much that in the midst of all our world’s chasing after idols, he took the initiative and made an unconditional promise of grace to send a Rescuer better than Gideon. He was so serious about this promise that he sent his own son, Jesus Christ.

And knowing full well what he was getting himself into by becoming one of us, Jesus said, “Even though they might not be making a fuss about their sins, yet I’ll go to the cross for them anyway. I, the Son of the living God, will become like them and in their place I will suffer and die for their idolatry.”

Friends, what does it mean that God is jealous for you? It means he is the only one who is exclusively loyal to you. Jesus your Savior is the only God who can help because he is only who came down from heaven and proved it by putting his holy, precious life on the line. Every false god demands more and more from us, one sacrifice after another. But the true and only God *gave* us his Son who now *gives* us the spoils of his victory over sin and death. That’s what makes Christianity so unique. It is the only religion based on grace! It was pure grace that, like a lightning rod, Jesus Christ willingly absorbed God’s wrath over sin on the cross so that all we would experience is the warm glow of God’s forgiveness and love. God is jealous for us because he has gone all-in to keeping his promises. And he made that commitment to you when he adopted you as his son or daughter at your baptism.

So now all of life has been transformed into moment by moment opportunities to discover God’s blessings as we worship him in the choices and decisions that we get to make. Worship isn’t just what we do on Sunday mornings. It’s not just singing songs. It’s not just rituals. It’s how we live in relationship with God and one another all week long. It’s all of life, every moment of it, now lived to the glory of God as a way to say, “Thank you, God, my dear God and Father in heaven, for your grace.”

What’s *the fuss about the plus*? Finally friends, Jesus is the only Lord who, even when you fail him, will not punish you and doesn’t demand more from you. He is the only Lord who even when you fall short, forgives you freely by his grace because alone went to the cross to die your death and then walked out of the tomb alive so you could go to heaven. Live for him and you will never be let down in the end. Amen.