

God Saves Sinners

Text: Romans 3:23-24

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The first commandment says, “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” In other words, God commands us not to trust, love, or depend on anything more than the Triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But when we place something or someone else in the center of our lives—when we depend on it for our identity, security, meaning, or hope—that becomes idolatry.

Ironically, idols are often good things. Family, children, parents, success, career, work, money, talents — even ministry itself — can become idols. Whatever controls our joy and sorrow, governs our emotions, and determines our sense of worth has taken God’s place. Idols quietly take hold of our hearts and begin to rule our lives.

About fifteen years ago, while serving a Korean church in Mesa, our congregation began a church building project. I shared a similar story with you two weeks ago. We purchased a church building, invested about \$150,000 in renovations, and moved in. At that time, I wanted us to have our own church building so badly that I failed to consider important factors such as the location and the surrounding demographics.

At that time, I was serving within the Korean Methodist Church, which differs somewhat from the United Methodist Church. Our theology was similar, but church policies were different. In the Korean Methodist Church in the United States, local congregations owned and managed their own church properties independently.

I believed that if we had our own building, the church would grow and ministry would flourish. But it did not happen. Because of the location and surrounding circumstances, the church did not grow — in fact, attendance declined. Eventually, we could no longer make the mortgage payments, and after eight years, we had no choice but to sell the building.

I thought that once we were free from the mortgage, things would improve. But they became worse. I felt like a failure in ministry. That burden weighed heavily on me. Since there was no longer a church office to go to, I spent many days at home alone while my wife went to work. I became overwhelmed by discouragement and depression. There were days when I even wondered whether life was worth continuing.

I noticed bitterness growing in my heart. My sermons became more judgmental and condemning. Each Sunday afterward, I regretted what I had said and promised myself I would never preach that way again — but the cycle continued. Then one day, while reading *Real Christianity* by William Wilberforce, God opened my eyes. I realized, “**The church building had become an idol to me.**”

God showed me that I had become trapped by the idol of success. I repented deeply, and by God's grace, I eventually transferred into the United Methodist Church.

This happens more often than we realize. When business is successful, people feel secure and proud — as though they have gained the whole world. But business goes up and down. When income drops, when customers leave, or when expectations fail, people become discouraged and spiritually shaken. Some stop praying. Some stop coming to church. In those moments, business may have become an idol. Money may have become an idol.

Around the world, income inequality remains a serious issue, doesn't it? Even in the United States, where efforts have been made to address the problem, studies suggest that the top 10% earn roughly 7 to 8 times more than the bottom 10%. In places like Hong Kong, the gap has been reported to reach nearly 44 times. In a sense, this reveals one of the vulnerabilities of a capitalist system.

But rather than discussing economics alone, I want to invite you into a simple thought experiment. Imagine — just for fun — that you had the power to create money yourself and spend as much as you wanted. Suppose you could simply print money whenever you wanted. Imagine printing one hundred \$100 bills. That would be \$10,000. Print one thousand, and you would have \$100,000. You could keep printing forever.

What would be the very first thing you would do? What would you buy first? Where would you go first? Think about that honestly. When you go home today, take a few moments to try this exercise. Your answer may reveal something important — not about your bank account, but about your heart.

Is money becoming an idol that determines your desires and security? Or is money simply a tool entrusted to you by God — a resource to serve God and bless your neighbors? Jesus often taught that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. So today, I invite you to ask yourself: "If I had unlimited money, what would my first desire reveal about what I truly worship?" Take that question home with you and listen carefully to what your heart says.

At the Korean church I served in Mesa, many Korean international students worshiped with us. Before moving to Mesa, the church had been located near ASU in Tempe, so students rode bicycles to Bible study and sometimes even walked to early morning prayer meetings. At one point, nearly half of our congregation consisted of young adults.

For many of those students, earning a Ph.D. was their goal. About twenty years ago, a Ph.D. from an American university opened many opportunities in Korea. But only some completed their

degrees, and those who did not often felt discouraged and defeated.

One student responded differently. She was the daughter of a pastor serving a small church in Seoul and came to ASU in her late thirties. After two years, she became depressed and eventually had to return to Korea without completing her studies. Before leaving, she said something I never forgot: **“My Ph.D. had become an idol.”** That moment stayed with me. Today she is living well in Korea and serving alongside her father in ministry.

I once read this definition of sin: **“Sin is building the meaning of life on something other than God — even if that thing is very good.”** Success. Ministry. Education. Children. Relationships. When we build our identity and meaning on these things instead of God, we become enslaved by them.

Augustine described sin in a similar way. He called it **“disordered love.”** Love directed toward the wrong things. Love out of order. Love that has lost its proper place. For example, when someone loves reputation more than truth, lying becomes easier.

There is a story about a pastor who announced: “Next Sunday, I’ll preach on the sin of lying. Please read Mark chapter 17 before you come.” The following Sunday, the pastor asked how many had read Mark 17. Many people raised their hands. The pastor smiled and said: “The Gospel of Mark only has 16 chapters.” Then he began his sermon on lying.

Why did they raise their hands? Because people wanted others to think they had done the reading. That story makes us laugh — but if we are honest, it reveals something about ourselves. We all want to appear more faithful, disciplined, or spiritual than we sometimes really are.

Today’s sermon title is **“God Saves Sinners.”** None of us is completely free from sin. When you drive, do you obey the speed limit every single time? Most of us don’t. I may be preaching here today, but if someone secretly recorded every moment of my life and projected it onto this screen, I would probably feel unworthy to stand here.

My dear friends, these are exactly the kinds of people God saves. God saves sinners. Jesus carried our sins on the cross, shed His blood, died in our place, and opened the way to salvation.

Idolatry is not just one sin among many. It lies at the heart of all sin because it puts something in God’s place. And that is why Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” **The good news is that the God we have rejected is the very God who came to save us.**

Throughout the Old Testament, God reveals His holiness and judges sin. Adam was driven from

Eden. Cain received judgment after killing Abel. For generations, the prophets called Israel to repent and turn away from idols. Yet again and again, the people refused to repent. As a result, in 587 BC, they fell and their nation was destroyed.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Liberty — What kind of God is our God? **God is love. God is good.** Our God is not eager to condemn. Our God desires to save. He placed our sins upon His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus shed His blood and died in our place. And whoever believes in Jesus Christ is forgiven.

God says: **“You are forgiven. You are accepted. You are made right with Me through Jesus Christ.”** And we become His children.

Most of you have a prayer life. Prayer and the Word are the ways God grows His church. Prayer strengthens our families and transforms our lives. Like many of you, I begin my mornings with prayer. I pray for you. I pray for people from my previous church. I pray for my family, for South Korea, and for the United States.

But sometimes, as I kneel to pray, memories of my own sins come back to me. Instead of praying, I become overwhelmed by worries and burdens. Perhaps some of you know that feeling. What do we do in those moments? Instead of looking at myself, I lift my eyes to God. I turn my eyes away from my weakness and toward Jesus Christ on the cross. I remember the love of God. I remember the grace of Christ. I sing praise. I write down names and bring people before God in prayer.

Dear friends, God is love. God saves sinners.

In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, we are made right with God, and we belong to Him forever. Thanks be to God.
Amen.