

“Cleaning Out Your Closet”

2 Kings 23:1-13

Series: Deeper Week 2: Cleanse Your Heart

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When I was a kid I hated Saturday. Every Saturday my Mom would say, “It’s time to clean out the basement.” “We just did it last Saturday,” we’d moan. “Well we have to do it again. Go on. Get down there.” We emptied it seven days ago. How did it fill back up again? The stuff must multiply like sea monkeys – which by the way we had down there...somewhere. It was a beautiful day outside and all our friends wanted us to come out and play. But we were condemned to slave away in a subterranean mine covered with wall-to-wall paneling. We waded through the half-finished airplane models, piles of Barbies missing three of their limbs, the G.I. Joes who only made a garbled death rattle when you pulled the dog tag. There were lots of board games. Back then I think parents used board games to give their children subtle messages that it’s going to be terrible when you grow up. Just think of the names of the games. Sure there is “Life” – your entire life is contained in a box. But there were even more dire warnings about the future. We had games called “Risk” and “Trouble” and of course “Sorry!” Get used to it kid: you’ll be saying this a lot.

The thing I think we had the most of were Legos. We had entire vats filled with Legos. Today Legos are a religion. They have Lego stores, Lego lands, Lego movies. They probably have a Lego star on the Hollywood walk of Fame. In fact, Hollywood is probably built of Legos. Lego has made 400 billion bricks since 1958 – that’s 62 bricks for every human on earth. I think we had one billion of them in our basement. Legos prove to me that kids today have no imagination. When we were kids Legos came in two colors – white and red – and two shapes: rectangle and square. There were no battleships or spaceships and no figures. There was only one thing you could do with Legos: build a really tall tower and then knock it down. That was it. That was all they were good for. And we were happy. Now Legos come in billions of shapes, colors and sizes and the kids are never satisfied. Today, if the Legos don’t assemble themselves into a life-sized Luke Skywalker that fights Darth Vader, takes out your appendix and makes sushi, the kids aren’t happy. No imagination.

Today, instead of Legos, let’s look at letting go. All of us are weighed down by clutter. It collects in basements, garages, closets, attics, sheds and storage units. You really don’t know how much stuff you have until you try to clean out one of these spaces or, worse, attempt to move. That’s when the truth comes out. An article in Time Magazine observes,

As anyone with a filled-to-the-gills closet knows, the things we accumulate can become oppressive. With all this stuff piling up and never quite getting put away, we’re no longer huddled masses yearning to breathe free; we’re huddled masses yearning to free up space on a countertop.

This longing to be clutter free spawned a movement called “The 100 Thing Challenge.” After looking around his stuffed San Diego home, Dave Bruno decided to start whittling his possessions down to 100 items. According to Dave, “Stuff starts to overwhelm you.” On his blog he describes his journey to junk the junk.

Bruno's online musings about his slow and steady purge have developed something of a cult following online, inspiring others to launch their own countdown to clutter-free living.¹

Imagine only having 100 items to your name. The author of the article says she has 100 items in her purse. It's so difficult that one devotee is bending the rules. A waitress in Chicago paired down her shoe collection from 35 to 20 pairs but she treats all her shoes as one item. I think that's cheating. An organizational expert says, "People are finding that their homes are full of stuff, but their lives are littered with unfulfilled promises." What most grabbed me about the article was the opening line: "Excess consumption is practically an American religion."

And that reveals a different kind of clutter – not the stuff in your bedroom closet but the clutter in your heart. All this stuff is feeding a hunger. In each of us there is an unfulfilled longing. In this first phase of DEEPER we are Longing for God. Last Sunday our journey started with a decision. We each can choose to take a step, leave behind a shallow relationship, let go of the dock and voyage to go deeper with Jesus. This involves risk, sacrifice, giving up control and comfort. Yet when we follow Jesus out to deep water, we become deeper, we discover what we were made for, we grow. You make a decision to follow your longing for God.

The next passage in our journey is clearing out the spiritual clutter that gets in the way of our relationship with God. The primary reason we don't long for God with all our heart is we long for other things more. The Bible has a word for these: idols. Here's the whole story of the Bible in a nutshell: again and again God's people fall in love with idols. They are idol hoarders. Not only do they fill their homes with false gods, they stuff God's house, the Temple in Jerusalem. So King Josiah decides to do some house cleaning.

If you recall from *The Story*, after King Solomon the nation of Israel is divided in half. The northern kingdom is called Israel, the southern Judah. Israel turns away and worships idols. Even the golden calf makes a comeback in their temple. So in 721 BC they are defeated by the Assyrian army and led away into exile never to be seen again. You would think Judah might learn a lesson. There were a few brief shining moments when Judah was true to the Lord. 700 years before Jesus, King Hezekiah worshiped the Lord, followed His Law, and cleared out all the idols and altars. Yet his son Manasseh became one of the most evil kings in Judah's history. During his long 55 year reign he filled God's Temple with idols to the gods of the nations around Judah. In the Ben Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem he did the unthinkable. Manasseh constructed an altar to the god Molech. On these stones he sacrificed his own son and encouraged others to do the same. When Manasseh died another son, Amon continued these abominations until he was assassinated by his own officials.

And so, 640 years before Jesus, little eight-year-old Josiah ascends to the throne and a new chapter begins. Like his great grandfather Hezekiah, Josiah loves the Lord. When he is twenty-six, he shows his love by embarking on a building campaign to restore the three hundred year old Temple. While they are fixing up the lobby, shampooing the carpets, and cleaning out the closets, Hilkiah the high priest finds a treasure.

¹Lisa McLaughlin "How to Live with Just 100 Things," *Time*, (Thursday, June 05, 2008)

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. (2 Kings 22:8)

Rushing to the king, Shaphan decides to play it cool. He gives his majesty a rundown of the construction project and then, in an offhanded way, mentions, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." Then he reads the scroll. For the first time in his life, King Josiah hears the words of Moses, the words of the Law, the Word of God. When Shaphan finishes, the king rises and tears his robes: a symbol of anguish and guilt, a sign of their torn and broken relationship with God. With the clarity of lightning, Josiah realizes how far they've fallen from the Lord.

All the elders, priests and people of the land are summoned to Jerusalem. Part rally, part revival meeting, the people hear, for the first time, the voice of God.

Josiah read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant. (2 Kings 23:2-3)

What follows is a vigorous house cleaning. Josiah empties the Temple of all the idols and altars his grandfather installed: Baal the storm god and Asherah the fertility earth goddess, the sun god with his chariot and horses, the moon goddess and all the constellations. He knocks down the altars to Ashtoreth of Sidon, Chemosh of Moab, and the altars where priests burn incense on hilltops across the nation. He removes the mediums, fortune tellers, spiritualists and household gods. Above all, Josiah destroys the detestable altar in the Valley of Ben Hinnom where innocent children were sacrificed to the terrible hunger of Molech, the god of the Ammonites. Centuries later Jesus will use the Valley of Ben Himmon as his illustration of hell.

When the idol clutter is cleared from Temple and nation,
The king gave this order to all the people: "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant." Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed. (2 Kings 23:21-22)

The purpose of the Passover is to remind the people how the Lord delivered them from slavery and gave them the Promised Land. Imagine if we did not celebrate our Independence on the 4th of July, if we never celebrated our salvation with Easter, if we cut Jesus out of Christmas (oh, wait...that is what we do).

How did a people fall so far from God? Why did they allow so much idol clutter to build up in the House of the Lord? You might ask the same of us. Why do we make and love idols? Why do we let them keep us from a deeper relationship with God?

We long for things instead of God. Why is it hard to clean out a closet? We love this stuff – a child's drawing, National Geographics, old birthday cards, a baseball card collection. Some is trash, some treasure. Which is which is hard to tell. The road to hoarding is paved with

these expressions: “I may need it someday” and “It may be worth something on Ebay.” So we fall in love with this stuff and can’t part with it. Then it builds up in basements.

This is also true internally. Our hearts get cluttered. We fall in love with the altars and idols the world offers. Corporate ladders, chemical highs, secret passions, pity parties, ego trips: these are just a few. The world tells us we need these; they may be worth something someday. So we worship them. Worship is not an event we attend where we sit in seats, sing and listen to someone speak. Worship is an expression of love. It is loving something or someone as the highest, the utmost, the ultimate in your life. All humans worship. We can’t stop worshipping. Even atheists worship. The Soviet Union, an atheistic state, put Vladimir Lenin on display so it would have an idol to worship. An idol is some portion of creation – a person, place or thing – we worship and love as the ultimate thing in our lives. You and I can’t help falling in love with idols. Not only do they clutter, complicate and crush our lives, idols make us forget our first love. Like the Israelites, we forget the Lord who created us and cared for us, found us and freed us, saved us and sustained us. How does this happen?

We listen to things instead of God. All the troubles in Israel started when they stopped listening to the Word of God. I imagine King Manasseh hid the Word of God in some back closet of the Temple so he could pursue his adulterous love affair with the gods of other nations. Consequently, two generations pass without any guidance from the Word of God. Why did they listen to other gods and nations instead of the Lord?

I majored in Religious Studies in college. Religion, I learned, is our human attempt to control our hostile environment, to gain power and to get our way. This is why every tribe and nation around the world, even atheists, creates a religion. When the people of Israel arrived in the Promised Land their neighbors told them if you want to grow crops, bring rain, win battles and have children you have to make idols, build altars, burn incense and offer sacrifices to all these gods. That’s the way it’s done, that’s what we’ve always done, that’s what you have to do to survive and get ahead. Make a deal with these deities, give them what they want and maybe they’ll bless you with what you want. And the Israelites fell for it. They fell so in love with these gods they were willing even to sacrifice their children to them. They also forgot their first love.

Our generation is bombarded by information. Amazon and Netflix, Google and YouTube, Fox News and CNN, Facebook and Twitter – they all tell us, sell us, share with us what we should think, act, do and be. What gets crowded out in all the noise and clutter is God’s Word. I’m not telling you to shut these things off. Simply listen first to the voice of your first love. Are you reading and studying His Scriptures? The Lord is not a religion. We did not make Him. We cannot control Him. Our relationship with Him is not a bargain we make. It’s a blessing which makes us whole. It’s not a conditional deal. It’s an unconditional love. Next week in Deeper we discover how to clear some space to rest and listen to God’s Word. What happens when we listen to other things more than God?

We let things be ultimate instead of God. People, places and things become idols when you let them be ultimate or most important in your life. Tim Keller observes:

Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.²

So how do you know when a very good thing becomes an idol in your life? When you build your life on it and are willing to sacrifice the other good things in your life for it. This is not difficult to see in the life of an addict. Someone who is enslaved by drink or drugs or desire will give up money, career, reputation, family, health and ultimately their lives to have it. The Israelites ultimately sacrificed their children. There are many different ways this is still happening today. Usually it does not start out that way. Idols tease and entice us until it is too late.

If you want to clean out the idol clutter in your heart, you must ask yourself: What is ultimate in my life? Remember, even very good things can turn into idols. If your ultimate is: Your spouse or partner: you will fall into jealousy, dependency, and controlling behavior. The other person's problems may consume you.

Your family and children: you will try to live your life through them until they resent you or have no self of their own. Taken to an extreme, you may abuse them when they let you down.

Your work and career: you will be a driven workaholic. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, fall into deep depression.

Your money and possessions: you'll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You'll do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually catch up with you.

Your pleasure, gratification, and comfort: you will find yourself getting addicted. You'll escape by continually medicating your pain until the solution becomes the problem.

Your relationships and approval: you will be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will be forever trying and failing to please people.

Your noble cause: you will divide the world into "good" and "bad" and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies since they give you purpose.

Your religion and morality: if you are living up to your moral standards, you will be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.³

This is the day to clean out the idol clutter from your soul. Let all these things return to their proper place – not ultimate idols but as servants of the One True God. Let's celebrate our Passover today and declare that the Lord is our first and ultimate love.

My Mom said, "It's time to clean up." Last May she asked my brother Steve and I to come down to her house in North Carolina and clean out my Dad's upstairs office. My Dad loved gadgets. Dad was at the center of a storm of cameras, reel-to-reel players, turntables,

²Tim Keller, "Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age," www.thegospelcoalition.org

³ Adapted from Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), pp. 275-276.

televisions, heath-kit projects and a multitude of computers. In his upstairs command center in Mooresville we found five computer monitors, four desktops whirring, three laptops glowing, two iPads playing and a cartridge in a 3D-printer. Plus, he had all the drawings, patents, and floppy disks of every machine created by The Hogle Corporation. They made machines which made parts for car and jet engines, hip replacements, firearms and a host of other products. My Grandfather started the business in his garage in Union, New Jersey. For sixty years it employed hundreds and built machines still working around the world. Yet around 2005 my Dad was forced to sell. It was his life. He was so in love with the business that he even followed it to North Carolina and kept working for the man who bought it from him. He couldn't let it go.

I must be honest with you: I resented the business. I am grateful that it put a roof over my head, fed, clothed me and made it possible for me to go to college. It provided many useful products. Yet there were times when I felt it stole my Dad away from us. It was the ultimate thing in his life – it demanded most of his money, time, energy and attention. And now, over a two day period, my brother and I threw it all away. What started in my grandfather's garage, departed from my father's garage. All his life's work – gone.

It made me very melancholy. At one time I judged my Dad. I was critical. Angry. No more. I've lived long enough to know that I have my idols. I realize one day my children will probably throw out all my sermons if I don't do so first. Those two days were a moment of grace. They allowed me to honestly ask, "What am I living for?" What seems today to be so monumental, stressful, imperative, urgent, the things that feed my soul will one day feed a dumpster. The only one to live for is the only One who lasts: the Lord.

As I sifted and sorted through all my Dad's stuff, I did find some treasure. I shared last Easter how I found his testimony of faith in Jesus under a pile of papers. What I also found were his last projects: pictures, videos, collections of us – his family. Those are the treasures he returned to in the end. Under the clutter I found all his first loves.

Are you ready to start some cleaning?