

## **“Grabbing the Golden Idol”**

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*<sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup>For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup>For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup>so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup>For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup>For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup>and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

*<sup>9</sup>But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*  
(Romans 8: 1-11)

In recent weeks there has been a resurgence of interest in one of the big cultural artifacts of my youth. I was only thirteen when “Raiders of the Lost Ark” first hit the big screen, but word spread fast about this amazing action adventure that managed to fold in wit, humor, and even some quick Sunday School refreshers on the Old Testament. It was easily the top-grossing box office hit of 1981, nearly doubling the receipts of the second-place finisher, “On Golden Pond.”<sup>1</sup>

So, for good reason, this summer’s release of “Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny” has left many of us Gen Xers feeling rather nostalgic. I found myself thinking back to the opening scene of that first movie, which includes some of the most iconic cinematography of the whole franchise. The archaeologist/treasure hunter Indiana Jones and one of his assistants enter the cave-like ruins of an ancient Peruvian temple. Having managed to slip past the diabolical booby traps that guard the prize he is seeking – a golden Aztec idol – Indiana Jones finally stands close enough to reach out and grab it.

But he knows it cannot be that simple. He suspects that, if the weight of the idol is suddenly removed, the worst of the booby traps will be triggered. To prepare for this contingency, he has filled a burlap bag with enough sand to simulate the weight of the idol. He thinks that if he can slide that bag onto the pedestal just as he slides the golden idol off of it, he will be able keep the trap from tripping. For a second, he believes he has successfully made the switch, but then we hear massive gears starting to turn. Jones is forced to make a mad dash out of the tunnel, dodging poisoned arrows, leaping pits, and finally outrunning a massive spherical stone designed to run him down and seal him inside the temple for good. He escapes only by the skin of his teeth.

Admittedly, it was more than nostalgia that brought this scene to mind this week. As we make our way through the Book of Romans this month, we find that Paul is spending a lot

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/1981/>



of time on the subject of sin. He confesses that he has tried his best to run the gauntlet of life as perfectly as possible, but somehow sin always finds a way to trip him up. I suspect that, as we strive to avoid sin in our lives, we all feel a bit like Indiana Jones in this way. As Jesus tells us, the path to heaven is narrow. “*Enter through the narrow gate,*” he says, “*for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it... [but] the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*”<sup>2</sup> But to me it often seems like the challenge we face is much more than a narrow gate at the end – that the path we are called to walk before we even get to that gate is peppered with so many pitfalls and mis-directions that we have to watch every step, lest we fall into sins that we never even saw coming.

Maybe it’s just me, but I don’t think so.

Fortunately for us, Romans has a few things to say about this metaphor. Whenever we start to feel as if trying to live a faithful life is like walking a narrow, booby-trapped, perilous path to God – Paul’s letter to Rome points out three key problems – three popular misconceptions – that distract us from the true path we are called to walk.

1. The first problem is this: we believe that, if life is a game like that, ***we still think we can beat it.*** If Indiana Jones did it, then we can too. We can run the gauntlet, grab the golden idol, and make it out alive. We just have to do the right kind of thinking, engage in the right kind of planning, have the right mindset, and commit ourselves to the right work ethic. Also, it doesn’t hurt to be in great shape... and maybe carry a whip... but we can beat this thing!

This is a very human way to think about sin. Maybe we imagine that God is up in heaven holding a big scale, and all of our good qualities and good deeds are being loaded onto one side of the scale, while all of our of our darker qualities and misdeeds are being stacked up on the other. And we hope that, in the end, our good deeds will outweigh our sins and misdeeds by at least a hair. Viewed this way, life boils down to a big balancing act, and we tell ourselves that, if we are vigilant enough, smart enough, committed enough, we can game the system and come out ahead. It’s a matter of effort and attitude, we say. With the right effort and the right attitude, we can run the gauntlet and claim the prize. As eternal optimists, we think we can beat it... and that’s problem number one.

2. Problem number two is that ***we think we are playing a human game.*** That is, after all, the kind of game that Indiana Jones was playing. Just as that golden idol had been envisioned by human minds and built with human hands, so were the traps meant to protect it. Yes, the intellectual and physical challenges were relentless and ingenious, but they were still human, and that made them fallible.

This is another way we can misconstrue the challenge of sin. We can try to unpack it as if it is a human contest... like it is a battle against mortal wits and abilities. It’s like that old story where two men go hiking in the woods, take a turn in the path, and are suddenly standing face to face with a bear. Both men immediately turn and run, but the bear is very hungry and very fast, and he is clearly gaining on them. The first man yells over to his friend in a panic, “How in the world are we going to outrun this bear?”

The other man is clearly calmer. “The way I figure it,” he replies. “I don’t have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you.”

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:13-14.

Do you see how this contorts the game of sin? From this perspective, the challenge is not to run the gauntlet perfectly and avoid every pitfall. This game would be more like the reality show “Survivor.” If you’ve ever watched that show, you know that no one gets points for elegance or good manners. The goal is simply to “outwit, outthink, and outlast” everybody else. In short, you don’t have to outrun the bear – you just have to outrun the other competitors.

And that’s problem number two: we fool ourselves into thinking of sin as if it is a human game played by human rules and judged on human terms.

3. This brings us to the third, final, and most ironic problem. If we tell ourselves that the challenge of sin is a human game ruled by human rules -- and we convince ourselves that we can win this game as long as we work hard enough and smart enough -- that mindset is, in and of itself, a sin.

Let’s not forget that the whole reason that Indiana Jones went into those ruins in the first place – the entire motivation behind his attempts to outwit, outthink, and outlast some brilliant Aztec engineers and priests – was **to grab a golden idol**. The Bible does not think much of idols. In fact, the Bible resoundingly condemns them as the worst kind of sin there is. Just look at the Ten Commandments – it contains some big-ticket no-no’s. And what are numbers one and two on the list? 1. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me;” and 2. *Thou shalt not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.*<sup>3</sup> Taken together, the gist is this: Thou Shalt Not elevate anything above God... Thou Shalt Not value anything on earth more than God... Thou Shalt Not be devoted to anything or put faith in anything more than God.

And one of the easiest and most prevalent ways that we as human beings to fall into this trap of idolatry is to put too much faith in our own abilities... our own judgment... and our own work. I know this is tricky, because so much of our lives is built upon a foundation of hard work. We teach our children the value of working hard. We push them to excel in school, so they can excel in a career, excel in other pursuits, so that – when they add it all up – they will find that they have excelled in life. This philosophy has served many of us in this room very well. And there is nothing wrong with this philosophy, as long as we recognize that there are limits to what human endeavor can achieve, especially when human endeavor is not tethered to and rooted in God.

One of the things that scripture specifically tells us is beyond our human reach is heaven. Paul is adamant that we “*are justified by faith.*”<sup>4</sup> “*For by grace you have been saved through faith,*” scripture says, “*and **this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.***”<sup>5</sup> We cannot save ourselves with our work. We cannot heal our own spirits by outsmarting our psyches. We cannot reconcile ourselves to God with anything we might do.

Paul learned this the hard way. As a Pharisee in the Jewish faith, he cultivated tremendous discipline. He studied, he prayed, he committed himself to obeying every aspect of the law. And he couldn’t do it. Some truly great figures in Christian history followed his lead: St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley – all them drove themselves crazy trying to run the gauntlet of sin, and they could never avoid the traps. It was only

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:1.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9 (emphasis added).

when they confronted this truth -- that as human beings, we cannot work ourselves into faith or salvation – that they became the luminaries that God intended them to be. That happened when they embraced the revelatory exhortation of the Apostle Paul, who said, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds... For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.”* It is better to instead, Paul said, the measure of faith God has given you.<sup>6</sup>

So, the next time we find ourselves getting frustrated because we see our call to live faithful lives like it is a deadly gauntlet that we have to run and beat, we need to remind ourselves of these three key mistakes and misconceptions that are actually traps in themselves:

1. Faith is not a game that we have to win with our own effort. God’s grace pulls us out of this rat-race. It is not something we have to earn; it is something that is given to us in love.
2. Discipleship is not a life-or-death struggle against flesh and blood; it is an invitation from a loving God. It is not a human game, but rather a divine imperative. That means that God is not our opponent in the game of life, and neither are other people. Faith is a blessing that is given to us by a benevolent and forgiving God, and all of us are in it together.
3. And finally, as we walk the path of faith, it is a grave mistake for us to think too highly of ourselves, or to put too much faith in things that we can do for ourselves. Work is honorable, and we have been given brains for a reason, but our human gifts and aptitudes can become golden idols unless we understand that they must be connected to God and animated by the Holy Spirit.

“Raiders of the Lost Ark” tells a great fictional story, but the true and present story of our lives will never depend on our ability to avoid the traps of sin. Scripture makes it clear that, no matter how hard we try, we are going to step in some of them. But that is not our story. Our story is the grand adventure of seeing how God makes those traps irrelevant... how God’s healing touch removes their sting... how Christ’s resurrection saves us from death... and how the Holy Spirit will keep our feet safely on the path to heaven.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:2-3.