Acts: The Idol of Gain
Acts 16:16-24

Good morning and welcome to Colonial. Before we jump into the book of Acts, let me speak quickly to the disaster that has been taking place all this week down in Texas. As you know, Hurricane Harvey has wreaked unprecedented havoc in large parts of southern Texas, particularly in the cities of Houston and Beaumont. Colonial’s response to this horrific, historic flooding will be two-fold: we will give, and we will go. Next Sunday we will take a relief offering that will be given to the EPC disaster relief effort. The resources that we give will be channeled through our sister churches in multiple communities throughout southern Texas. We are also beginning to plan some dates for us to go down and help with the clean-up efforts, which will likely be needed for several years to come. If you think you might like to lead a team down to Texas, please contact Meganne Leighton or Randall Leonard who staff our Impact Ministries office, or be sure to mention it to your local campus pastors. We are also in conversation with many of our partner churches here in the city, so we may end up promoting and joining some of their trips down to Texas as well. I will keep you informed of our upcoming trip dates through my Friday email.

I would also draw your attention to the massive flooding that is now taking place in India, where 1200 lives have already been lost and millions of lives displaced. Many of you are connected with our partner, the India Gospel League, and I’m sure they would appreciate your prayers and support as well as they do what they can to minister to their countrymen suffering in India.

OK, let’s turn our attention to the Word of God to seek His purpose for our lives. We are on a journey through the book of Acts, and today our text is Acts 16:16-24. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

Remember that Paul and Silas, along with Luke and Timothy, have received a vision from God to share the Gospel with the residents of Macedonia. They are now in the city of Philippi, and already they have had a powerful encounter with a resident there named Lydia, who not only gave her life to Christ, but also invited them to set up their operations center in her house!

Our text this morning records another outing in Philippi, and it begins much like the first. In vs. 16 we read, “As we were going to the place of prayer…” We know from last week’s story that the place of prayer was at the riverside there in Philippi (likely the Gangites River if you are familiar with that area), and, of course, this was Paul’s strategy: to begin his work in a place where people might be spiritually open.
Again Paul and his team encounter a woman, but this woman is…different…to say the least. Picking up with vs.16 we read, “As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.”

The Greek term that Luke uses to describe the “spirit of divination” is *pneuma pythona*, which literally translates as, “a spirit of Python” or “a Pythonian spirit.” “Python” is a reference to the soothsaying divinity originally conceived of as a snake or a dragon, which was originally known as Pythia (Bock, Acts, p 535). This spirit was said to direct women by overpowering them and allowing them to foretell the future.

I tell you all of that so that you can appreciate the cultural context that Paul is stepping into here. This young girl is likely beautiful and seductive. In the ancient world that Paul lived in, such women were not to be trifled with. Such is why Paul likely tries to avoid the girl at first. He is not looking for a fight with one who wields a Pythonian spirit.

Now you may be asking yourselves, “Did she really have a power to tell the future? Is there really such a thing as a fortune teller or one possessed by a Pythonian spirit?” The Bible is very clear that there are those who have spiritual powers to tell the future and to perform other forms of “magic” if you will…and the Bible is also clear that as the people of God, we are to stay clear of them and we are to avoid such practices. Take a look at what Moses says to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 18:9-14:

9 “When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, [as] anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer 11 or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, 12 for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. 13 You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, 14 for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

I don’t think the Bible could be clearer about this subject: the practice of telling fortunes, interpreting omens, sorcery, charming, acting as a medium or a necromancer, or inquiring of the dead is strictly condemned and forbidden. Why? Because clearly there is power there, but it’s a dark power…one that is not sanctioned by God, nor is it to be practiced by His people. Now, you might be surprised how common these practices remain even here in the United States. If you Google “mediums in Kansas City,” you’ll find 11 options. You’ll find over 20 options in New Orleans! One website claiming to be an official sight for spiritualists said that six mediums in America made over 5M last year. Another article claimed that 1 out of every 7 Americans has
consulted a medium or a fortune teller. As our culture becomes more hostile towards Christianity, the rise of “spiritualists” is on the rise. All that is to say…I don’t think this story from 2000 years ago is the least bit irrelevant. I’ve spoken with people who claim to be Christian but then consult mediums (and I suspect there are people here that have done so as well), and they are always quick to point out that mediums help people and bring hope. They are also quick to point out that the medium often reveals something that is true…freakishly detailed, and that because the medium is legit, telling the truth, and well-intentioned, that somehow validates the medium as perfectly safe and acceptable for consultation.

So let’s deal with that question…what if the fortune teller or the medium is actually telling the truth? What if they are really nice people who are “using their gifts to help others?” No harm, no foul, right? Wrong. In the passage we just read in Deuteronomy 18, God makes no distinction between “good, helpful mediums” and “scandalous, inaccurate mediums.” He simply says, “NO MEDIUMS!”

In case you are thinking that’s just some Old Testament concept, I would remind you of when Jesus confronted a man who was possessed by an evil spirit in Luke 4. Here’s what we read beginning with vs. 33:

33 And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 34“Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” 35But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. 36And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!”

Jesus is not interested in the content of what is said by the possessed man, even if it is true. He silences the demon, and then casts it out, which brings freedom to the man who was possessed.

I have looked deeply into this subject, and I strongly urge all Christians to heed God’s Word: stay away from the mediums and the fortune-tellers…they are knowingly or unknowingly working for the wrong team. That kind of power can be tantalizing, but it goes south in a hurry.

Now look what happens next in our story here in Acts 16, beginning with vs. 17, “She followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’ And this she kept doing for many days.”

Again, the woman possessed of a Pythonian spirit is actually pronouncing the truth, and we are left to assume that there is no other way she could have known Paul’s identity had she not been possessed and had the power to tell the future. So is there really a problem here? One could
argue that, in a way, Paul and his team are getting some free advertising, right? This girl is respected as a spiritual powerhouse in her city, and she is validating that Paul and his team represent the Most High God and that they are there to proclaim the way of salvation. She’s not casting a curse upon them; she’s not a bad person; the power she has is only “helping the ministry”, right? Wrong…and here’s why: because by telling the truth, and associating herself with the ministry of Paul and his team, she is also validating the power that is in her…the spirit of Python. When Paul and his team reveal that they are actually servants of the Most High God who come to proclaim the way of salvation, the owners of the slave-girl grin and rub their hands together…they’re already making plans for all the money this woman will bring in. We can almost hear them say under their breath, “Thank you Paul. You just validated our girl…and thanks for the free advertising! You go ahead and keep preaching about salvation…that just makes our girl look more brilliant than ever which will increase our profits and allow us to expand our business.” You see that, right?

So, after several days of this scenario, the Holy Spirit moves Paul to take action. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 18, Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

Now, there’s a lot here, but we’ve covered this ground before during our series in Luke, so I won’t belabor it. Simply put: there is power in the name of Jesus, amen! Paul takes authority over the spirit of Python by invoking the name above all names…the name of Jesus Christ, and the invading spirit leaves. Always remember this…In the spiritual realm, there is no other name that saves…only the name of Jesus, who according to Jesus, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28). If you ever find yourself in a battle with spiritual darkness, call upon the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth…I can tell you from personal experience, there is power in that name!

Now, for all practical purposes, this should be the end of this story, and there should have been a great party thrown in the city of Philippi! This poor slave girl, who has had an invading, demonic presence occupying her body for who knows how long, is now free! She is free to be who God made her to be, and Luke no doubt is assuming that this girl becomes a follower of Jesus.

But there is no celebration in Philippi when this girl has been saved in Christ. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 19, “But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.’”

Now, notice the irony here. First of all, instead of being happy for the demon-possessed girl, the owners are enraged. They don’t care about the girl, they clearly don’t care about the gospel or
the way of salvation, they care about MONEY and the ROMAN WAY. So what do they do when their financial gain and nationalism are threatened? They seize Paul and Silas (not Timothy or Luke because they were not Jewish), and they make these accusations against them: 1) these men are Jews (there are clearly racial prejudices associated with that first statement); 2) they are disturbing the city; and 3) they advocate customs that are not lawful for Roman citizens to accept or practice.

Now, do you hear the underlying assumptions of these accusations? Here are just a few: 1) in a Roman city, everyone should be entitled to whatever kind of spirituality they want to practice, even if that means exploiting a demon-possessed girl…which is why those darn Jews are unacceptable-- they believe their God is the only true God; 2) the pursuit of gain trumps all…so regardless of any religious teaching or ethic, disrupting a person’s source of income is unlawful; and 3) the things listed as unlawful to accept or practice in the Jewish Bible are the very things that are protected by law in a Roman city like Philippi. i.e….those Jews should not be casting out a spirit that was making us money! That’s not the Roman way!

Do you see what has happened? The power of Jesus has threatened to topple the Idol of Gain and the Idol of Nationalism, and whenever that happens, there is always hell to pay.

Look at vs. 22, “The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had afflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

Now…I want you to take this scripture to heart, even though it’s painful. I want you to think about your own lifestyle, your own assumptions and tendencies. How would you react if the salvation and liberation of a person required you to give up your income stream? Would you do it? How would you react if the liberation and salvation of another person required you to disassociate with your national allegiances? Would you do it?

If I were asking you that question, and you lived in Iran, the answers would simple: following Jesus and telling others about Jesus is ALWAYS going to cost you financially, and it ALWAYS means letting go of national allegiance. That would be true in India, Nigeria, and many places around the world.

But let’s take a moment and consider American Christianity. Would it be fair to say that American Christianity is largely idolatrous in exactly the ways that we have seen in our text this morning? Would it be fair to say that we practice our religion of Christianity with good intentions, but we quite often get offended…even angry…if our idols of GAIN and NATIONALISM are threatened by Jesus?
I suspect that is true, particularly because any time I preach a message that threatens either of these two idols, GAIN and NATIONALISM, I get lots of emails! Let me ask you a few questions: the Bible tells us to bring our tithe to God…are you tithing? If not, is it possibly because you are spending so much money on all of your personal pleasures, your second homes, your expensive cars, that you actually believe you can’t afford to tithe to God’s church? Offended yet?

Business leaders: the Bible tells us to do everything we do to the glory of God. Are your business practices bringing glory to God, or do you conveniently separate your faith and your business? What would your co-workers say about your witness when it comes to the way you do business, the way you treat your staff, the way you treat your clients or your board members? Offended yet?

When David and Solomon were tasked to construct the Temple in Jerusalem, the people considered it a privilege to give sacrificially to see the House of God constructed. How do you feel about our recent capital campaign? Would it surprise you to know that close to 50% of the families of this great church refuse to give a dime to help construct a youth building and to update our facilities? Why do you think that is? Offended yet?

What would you think about me if I said that only those members who were committed to tithe should be qualified to serve as Elders? Would that offend you, even though tithing has always been considered a historical behavior of Christian discipleship? Does it offend you that members who are not giving cannot serve as elders or deacons? Offended yet?

Does it bother you that as Americans we represent 5% of the world’s population but we consume 24% of the world’s energy resources and produce half of the world’s waste? What do you think Jesus would say about our country…about the way we spend money on ourselves and ignore the plight of the poor; what would he say about our sexual ethics? What would Jesus have to say about how we teach our children in the public schools that they evolved from fish and monkeys…that there is no god or at least no one can know anything about God? What would Jesus say about our foreign policy, the racial tensions, the millions of hours we spend staring at screens…Offended yet?

The first commandment is clear: you may have no other gods before the One True God. Biblical Christianity does not accommodate competing idols…not even financial gain or nationalism. And take note of the text: true, powerful, liberating, life-saving Christianity topples the idols of financial gain and nationalism, and that always comes at a cost. And you don’t have to be a pastor or a missionary to feel that…simply set out this week to honor God with every business decision you have to make, and you’ll feel the tension. Set out this week to speak the truth in love in your relationships, and you’ll feel the tension. Set out this week to be proactive in...
your relationships with people from other countries, and you’ll see the idol of nationalism for what it is.

Rest assured we have many idols in our lives: the idols of materialism, family, popularity, conflict avoidance, pleasure, intelligence, degrees, success, hobbies, sexual gratification, inclusivity, and a thousand others. Remember: idols are almost always good things that we have made into ultimate things. But idols are also the means by which the Python Spirit enter into a human soul and hold it hostage.

You want to know where your idols are? Listen, when you are ready to walk away from biblical Christianity because you are so offended, you’ll know what idols rule your life. When you are ready to persecute, ridicule, and conspire against Jesus and His church…take a good hard look at where your anger is coming from, and you’ll find your idols. These people in the city of Philippi are under the rule and sway of idols who own them…and when these idols of gain and nationalism are threatened by the power of Jesus who has come to topple idols and cast out evil spirits…there is a battle, and it’s not pretty.

Consider this: We live in a culture dominated by the media, and the media systematically teaches us that all people should be entitled to worship whatever idol they want to as long as their idol worship isn’t hurting anyone. But here’s the truth: God will not have us bow before any idol, and if you preach that…if you live that…if you cling to the Gospel and speak the truth in love such that it topples the idols of this age…it’s going to hurt. You will not be popular…you will likely feel the sting of anger, persecution, false accusations, and maybe physical suffering as well. If you’re a pastor, you might even get fired!

But don’t forget the girl. That beautiful young girl who looks like she has power and money and influence is actually a slave in need of rescue…and she’s not alone. We are all slaves to our idols until that day when someone is brave enough to confront our idolatry and cast out the evil spirit within us by proclaiming the beautiful, idol-wrecking, liberating, culture changing name of Jesus. Only Jesus can save us…only Jesus can set us free. Paul and Silas were courageous and faithful, and as a result, the girl is liberated and set free. The cost for the Jesus followers is persecution and torture, but they will gladly endure the pain…to the point that next week we will see them singing hymns in prison all night long! That’s what biblical Christianity looks like. Don’t think for a moment that we will see true liberation happen in the lives of people until we are ready to have our own idols destroyed and suffer the wrath of those who would rather kill us then let their idols get toppled.

So, before we come to the table, grab a piece of paper and a pen, and take a minute to identify your idols. What good thing have you made into an ultimate thing in your life? How does Christ most often offend you…that’s your idol. Is it your money, your retirement, your kids, your
country, your sexual satisfaction, your time, your job, your boyfriend or your girlfriend, your need for revenge…what have you made ultimate in your life, such that Jesus has to go before it goes? Write that down, and then consider this: Jesus died on a cross so that you could be free of those idols…so that you could be free of that Pythonic Spirit that whispers in your ear. Before you come to the table, take a minute to repent. Confess your idols before the Lord, and if you dare, confess your idols to a person next to you. We all have idolatry issues. James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins one to another and pray for each other that you might be healed.” And then come to the table, and be washed by the blood of Christ. Let Him do His work in you. Apply the power of the name to whatever holds you back, so that you might experience the freedom that Christ died to give you. If you are not willing to confess your idols and repent…don’t come to the table, please. It would be disingenuous and an insult to the sacrifice of our Lord. This table is for those who are repentant…this table is for those who know they need a Savior.

Let’s pray.