

Stewardship – January 31, 2010

Joshua 24:14-26 **LOVE CHOOSES THE LORD**

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Fellow members of God's family,

Ever reach that point in your life where you've just had enough, when you realized things just aren't going in the direction you want them to be headed, people pulling us in different directions? Life can be so frantic and distracting, can't it? And then there never seems to be enough time. Those of you who are or have been parents, you know what I'm talking about. It's time to change diapers, stop fights, dry tears, feed faces, and shuttle children to lessons, practices, games, and parties. Then, where is time for the spouse or aging parents or...? Even being a child brings the time demands of chores, and homework, and sports, and...? As Christians we know we are to live a life committed to God, but there times we feel we should just be committed to an institution. History shows how easy it is to get caught up in the worldly rat-race around us. That's exactly why we need to take a long look at our lives and to heed Joshua's challenge in the words before us today, the challenge, whether married or single, to put the Lord at the center of our family life. So, on the basis of this account we see that...

LOVE CHOOSES THE LORD

When we think of the children of Israel, we often think of big events in their history: the 10 plagues, the Passover, crossing the Red Sea, Mt. Sinai and the 10 commandments, crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the walls of Jericho falling down. But the lives of the Israelites weren't continuous big events, there were 40 years spent between the Red Sea and the Jordan River just wandering in the wilderness. That's a lot of "normal" days and weeks and months... And now they were in the Promised Land, the land was theirs. The chapter before this says, "...*a long time had now passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from their enemies and Joshua was old and advanced in years.*"(23:1) The big events were done. It was just normal, regular living, getting up, working, eating, resting, taking care of family, visiting friends, going to worship. Things were, well they were normal... You might say it was just like now. Nothing special was going on.

And yet it was at this time, that Joshua called all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem. Joshua knew that his time was coming to an end. But as he looked toward the future of his people, and as he saw them going about their normal routines he felt an urgent need to speak to his people one last time. And so the people came, from their homes, from their work, from their villages to hear what Joshua had to say.

I.

These words ring out to us over 3000 years later, "*Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness, throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped and serve the Lord. Choose this day whom you will serve.*" All these Israelites - men, women, teenagers, children - might have been tempted to ask at first, "What's he getting all worked up about? Of course we will serve the Lord, we're his people, we're believers. Yada, yada, yada..." The answer seemed so obvious and so easy. But it wasn't so obvious and it wasn't so easy. **Joshua was asking for more this day. Throw away all other gods, serve the Lord only, with 100% commitment.** Joshua said God is "jealous." He doesn't want us to love anything or anyone more than we love him. The central meaning of that word "jealous" is in the context of marriage. Jesus considers his people as his bride. Adultery, running after someone other than you spouse, threatens the rela-

relationship and can bring it to ruin. In connection with Israel, God built that relationship. He planned for it, he sacrificed himself for it, he initiated the reconciliation. It really doesn't make any sense to love anything or anyone more than God. Think about everything that God has done for us. Idols don't do anything for us except take our respect, love, and trust away from the One who really cares.

Your lives might be normal right now, but you dare not **take your relationship with God for granted**. Take a quick look back. How many times hadn't the Israelites complained and stumbled? How many times hadn't they run back to their gods from Egypt, or been guilty of chasing after some of the new gods in the Promised Land? **They were enticed by the immoral living around them. They were tempted to want and taste the best of both worlds.** And Joshua was saying, "No dice. Throw away those gods and serve the Lord only. Be careful of the *'snares and traps'* around you." (23:13)

It was quite a challenge, it was asking a lot. But was it too much to ask? So Joshua reviewed for them again all the wonderful things God had done for them. In effect he was saying, "*You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. Undeserved blessings have followed you and will follow you. Now how are you going to respond to that love?*"

And that's the challenge that comes down through the centuries to us sitting in this very church on this normal Sunday. "***Fear the Lord your God and serve him only.***" It's the first commandment, isn't it? And at first this might not stir us too much. I believe in God. I serve God. I'm here, aren't I? But Joshua isn't asking for half-hearted commitment and service, he's talking about 100% dedication to God. Do you see the snares and traps? Sometimes it's harder to see those things on "normal" days, when we don't face life's big challenges. Subtle pressures continually pull at us from a society that says, "It's OK to..." whatever your temptation is... And then when you walk down commandment row – ask yourself, "Am I tempted to want the best of both worlds? A world that teaches us to say in marriage, at work, at school... "Serve me!" Are we tempted to shrug our shoulders—it is what it is.

Joshua spoke very clearly about such an attitude, "***If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods...*** (make other things more important) ... ***he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you.*** (23:20) So choose you this day, whom you will serve.

Whom are you serving? Whom will you serve in the future? As Joshua reviewed all God had done for the Israelites, think of all God has done for you. Maybe you didn't cross the Red Sea or gather manna from heaven every morning, or watch the walls of Jericho go down. But that same God did something even better for you. In love he sent his Son to be our substitute. For you he gave his Son, for you he gave salvation, for you he has prepared heaven. If you want a miracle with water; look at your baptism, when God worked through water and his powerful word to make you his child. If you want a miracle with bread, look at the Lord's Supper, this heavenly food which assures you of forgiveness and strengthens you for life. Look at your own life and see his guidance, protection and presence. See how many times he has brought you up out of the valley, to green pastures. Is there a promise he hasn't kept?

II.

These times of reflection and renewal are important. So, before you go back to your normal lives look carefully at what your Father in heaven has done for you and then choose whom you will serve. Now, understand that in this passage Joshua is speaking to believers not unbeliev-

ers. Unbelievers cannot make the choice to come to God. They are dead in their sins, the Bible says. Only the Holy Spirit can make them alive. But now as a believer, with the Holy Spirit working in you, can you respond to God's love. You can choose to rededicate yourself. And remember that there is no riding the fence, no trying to have it both ways, one foot following the ways of the world and the gods of this world and one foot trying to follow the God of the Bible. It's one or the other. Jesus himself said so in Matthew 6:24 that you cannot serve two masters. That's the choice Joshua was laying out before the Israelites. In effect, he was saying, "Look at me, battled veteran of faith that I am. Here, on this day I and my house rededicate ourselves to serve the Lord." It didn't really matter to Joshua if he was the only one, in view of what God had done for him. He was ready to recommit himself to God. But he wasn't alone. The people responded, "Yes, God has done wonderful things for us. ***We too will serve the Lord because he is our God.***" (24:18)

What a great day this had become! But you know that after this day, they didn't go marching forward and knock down any more walls. We read, "***Joshua sent the people away, each to his inheritance.***" They didn't go out and do some great thing for the Lord. They simply went back home, back to their daily lives. But they went back having made a promise. Now they faced the challenge of living up to their words. Now they faced the challenge – again, as always – of serving God whole heartedly in their daily, normal lives.

Focus again on vs. 15, **As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.** What Joshua says here reminds us that living as one of God's children begins within the walls of our own home. Joshua spoke for his whole family which teaches us dads, that we are responsible for the spiritual health of our home. It is up to us to make sure God's words are heard. It's important to have devotions not just on Sunday but also household devotions during the week. When we give God the opportunity to speak to us in our homes it keeps us from getting off track and out of whack. It helps the family know and serve the Lord in a world that undermines our faith. So take time at your house to sit together around God's word, to create a time to discuss God's love and will. Take advantage of every opportunity and conversation to build the most important relationship, our relationship with our saving God through Jesus.

God also wants us to be his mask. What is his mask? You are! Through you He shows his love to others. Through you he pushes his 5 year old on the swing; he puts a bandage on a skinned knee; he listens to the frustrations; he encourages – through you! Family is a gift of God entrusted to our care. It is the intimate unit where love can be modeled and learned. But LOVE TAKES TIME. It takes time for husbands and wives to demonstrate love and respect toward each other as a reflection of the love between Christ and the church. It takes time for parents to carry out their responsibility as spiritual leaders for their children, to exhibit the heart and will of God and pass on their faith and values to the next generation. It takes time for children to learn to show obedience, honor, and respect for their parents (even caring for them in their old age).

Thank God for your family. Take the time to run through their needs in your head and add that to your prayers. Spend the time with them to care for this gift of family which God has given you. Begin with a commitment to better balance your time. Unclutter your calendar. Consider what you will take out of your week in order to clear time for family. Determine what will be most meaningful for them and what will draw them out of the idolatry of the world into the arms of their God; out of self-centered activities and into a passion to follow the Lord.

Before you leave today let Joshua's words echo once again, "Choose you this day." You, believers, on this normal day look again at God's great agape love. Look again at what you are

and what he has made you - his redeemed, precious child. Now Joshua says, respond to that love. How? We don't need to have an altar call, but now in the quietness of your heart, in view of God's great love, in view of how easy it is to grow complacent and backslide, Lord, now let me rededicate myself to serving you and you alone. **Lord, help me to say as Joshua did, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Rededicate and live.** Live your faith every day. In everything you do, strive to give God your very best.

Even if I was all alone here today, this would still be my challenge. But how blest that I am not alone! How good to have brothers and sisters in faith - to challenge me, to hold me accountable, to inspire, to encourage, who say to me in words and actions, let's do this together.

If you could stop your life and reorder it to include more time for family, what would it look like? What is most important for your family? Where do those in your family need your time most right now? On their deathbeds, few, if any people, have regretted not spending more time at work, on the job. Many, however, regret not spending more time with family and showing what a great God they have and how awesome it is to serve him. **LOVE TAKES TIME for family. Love chooses the Lord.** Hugs, attention, listening, planning special events, time for spiritual nourishment, those may be elements that need your time. Take time for what matters most. Make those things "non-negotiable" or else other things will fill those spaces. Let your family be a place where Christ's love is known and his lordship is followed. Let Christ's love lead you to make the right choices!