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Joshua #15

## Sermon Summary #15

### Choose this day Whom you will Serve! Joshua 24:1-33

The only way I know how to begin this concluding message from the book of Joshua is by saying, “***This isn’t a sexy sermon!***” Don’t be offended that I use those terms. I’m not saying this message isn’t about “sex”. One only has to look at Joshua 24 to realize it has nothing to do with sex. What I mean when I say it isn’t a “sexy” sermon is that at first hearing *it doesn’t seem to sizzle*. It’s not dazzling or glitzy or eye-popping or the sort of sermon that causes people’s jaws to drop in amazement. Let me explain a bit more what I mean.

A number of years ago I heard a well-known Christian communicator lament the fact that the church today, tragically, has become *bored with traditional spiritual virtues*. He had in mind such things as integrity, humility, fidelity, patience, and love. In its pursuit of political power and its fascination with growth and numbers and money and media sound bites, the church has lost sight of the significance of certain fundamental moral virtues. There is simply no other way to put it: *such things just aren’t sexy!* They are easily ignored.

***If you want to build a big church and keep the money flowing, preach about sex! Preach about the Antichrist! Preach about seven keys to financial prosperity! But for heaven’s sake don’t talk about things like honesty and service and kindness and above all else, never, ever preach about commitment!***

Commitment is so old-school. It’s archaic. It’s impractical. Commitment is horribly out of touch with the progressive mindset of 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Life today, so we are told, is all about choices and the opportunity to set my own course at my own pace in a way that makes me feel good and satisfies my most basic needs. Life is all about the unfettered freedom to turn on a dime and go the opposite direction this month from the direction I was heading last month. Keep your options open. Don’t lock yourself in to anything or anyone.

This is one reason fewer and fewer husbands are committed for life to their wives. It’s why wives are less and less committed for life to their husbands. Commitment is ok so long as it’s convenient. Commitment works so long as it’s comfortable.

*Commitment to one’s church* is in even shorter supply today. The idea of steady, stable, persevering commitment to the life and ministry of a local church and the people who comprise it just isn’t sexy. People treat their relationship to the church like they do their marriages: at the first sign of trouble they just move on down the road and try another.

This is nowhere better seen than in the profound lack of commitment in our day to our corporate gatherings on Sunday morning: “If we can’t go to the lake, if I feel rested, if I didn’t stay out too late on Saturday night, if my favorite football team (or basketball team) isn’t playing the early game on TV, if it’s too wet or cold to play golf, if the laundry is done, well, then I’ll go to church.”

As bad as that has become, worse still is ***the pathetically low level of commitment on the part of professing Christians to God***. They stay committed to God only so long as his commitment to them brings physical health and financial prosperity and personal success.

I don’t profess to know why any particular individual struggles to commit. Maybe you’ve just never seen it done well. Maybe your parents failed to model this virtue for you as you were growing up. Perhaps you thought they were committed until times turned sour and then you quite literally woke up one day to discover that either your mother or father had walked out the night before, never to return.

It may be that people you trusted and admired bailed out for the flimsiest of reasons. Perhaps you've just watched too much TV where "commitment" is little more than the punch line in a joke, at best, or, at worst, a four-letter word that had to be bleeped out of your life.

But make no mistake: **Joshua 24 is all about commitment**: commitment to one's family, commitment to truth and to moral virtue, and above all else, commitment to God. So, if you came this morning looking forward to a sexy sermon that sizzles, go ahead and pull out your I-phone and start surfing the net.

As for chapter 24, we find here Joshua's final words to Israel just before his death at the age of 110. It takes place at Shechem (v. 1), where years before one of the most remarkable scenes of covenant renewal took place (see 8:30-35). The entire nation and all its leaders were present as *Joshua reminded them of what God had done in the past (vv. 2-13) and what commitment on their part for the future entailed (vv. 14-28)*.

Let me briefly **summarize vv. 2-13**. Here Joshua rehearses Israel's history ever so briefly. In vv. 2-4 he speaks of God's call of Abraham and the formation of the nation of Israel. In vv. 5-7 he turns his attention to Moses and Aaron and the experience of the people of Israel in Egypt during their years of slavery and their eventual deliverance in the Exodus. In vv. 8-10 he describes the wandering of Israel in the wilderness and how God protected them from the false prophecy of Balaam. Finally, in vv. 11-13 he mentions their crossing over the Jordan River and their conquest of the promised land of Canaan.

The point of this brief reminder of Israel's history is to highlight *the preeminence of God's sovereign grace*. Look at the intentionally repetitive emphasis on God's sovereign initiative: "**I took** your Father Abraham" (v. 3a); "**I led** him through all the land of Canaan" (v. 3b); "**I gave** him Isaac" (v. 3c); "and to Isaac **I gave** Jacob" (v. 4a); and "**I gave** Esau the hill country" (v. 4b); "**I sent** Moses and Aaron" and "**I plagued** Egypt with what **I did** in the midst of it, and afterward **I brought** you out" (v. 5); "then **I brought** your fathers out of Egypt" (v. 6); "then **I brought** you to the land of the Amorites" and "**I gave** them into your hand" and "**I destroyed** them before you" (v. 8). On and on it goes.

**21 times in vv. 2-13 the first person singular occurs with God as the subject!** The ultimate reason why Abraham came out of paganism and birthed a nation is because of my sovereign, saving grace, says the Lord. It's also the only and ultimate reason why Israel now stands in possession of the land of Canaan. It's also the only and ultimate reason why you are here today, in possession of eternal life and forgiveness of sin. It's also the only and ultimate reason why there is a Bridgeway Church.

Do you think of your life in these terms? Do you see that all you are and have and now can reasonably hope for in the future and into eternity is all because of the singular gracious commitment of God to you in Christ Jesus?

So how will you respond to that? Well, before we answer that question, let's look at how Israel was asked to respond.

"Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:14-15).

Let me make just a few observations on *Joshua's call for commitment*. **First, you must choose!** Straddling the fence and wavering between options is impossible. There is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to your relationship with God. **Indecision is a decision!** It's all or nothing. These words from Joshua were a call for undivided loyalty and complete commitment.

I suspect you've seen the cartoon where a hen and a hog are standing outside a church following the service. The pastor has just preached on how to help the poor and hungry. "I've got it," says the hen. "We can help by providing a ham and eggs breakfast for those who don't have anything

to eat.” “Oh, no you don’t,” says the hog. “For you, that only means a contribution. But for me, it’s total commitment!”

Well, that’s what Joshua is calling for: total, unreserved, unconditional commitment.

**Second, you must choose for yourself!** No one can make this choice for you. Joshua couldn’t make it on behalf of the Israelites. I can’t make it for you. Do you realize how many people in a local church live vicariously through their pastors? They think that if their pastor or one of their Elders is totally committed, that means they are because they attend that particular church. That’s also why when a pastor or leader fails or falls such people suffer irreparable spiritual and psychological damage. You can’t serve the Lord on someone else’s coattails!

**Third, although everyone eventually reaches the age when he or she must choose for oneself, Joshua also took responsibility for more than himself. He acknowledges the obligation he has as leader of his entire family.**

Parents, you are not responsible for, nor do you have the power to determine whether or not your children believe and pursue God and trust him. But you do have an obligation to lead them and teach them and explain to them the gospel. It isn’t your business to save them, but it is your business to put them in an atmosphere at home and in the church where God can. Some of you men today stand alone for God in your family. Some of you women today do likewise. Your spouse may mock you, despise you, and even ultimately walk out on you. Your children may never embrace Christian faith. But God is calling you today, no less than he called upon the Israelites back then, to commit yourself whole-heartedly and unreservedly to him.

**Fourth, take note of Joshua’s determination.** Some of you may choose the gods of the Amorites, “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” No matter what anyone else in Israel does, even if I end up standing alone, God can count on me. You can almost hear Joshua say: ***“I will not succumb to the pressure of the majority. I will not sacrifice faith for comfort. I will not exchange commitment for popularity. I will not abandon God to curry the favor of men.”***

Their response is wonderful: “Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God” (v. 18). Joshua’s response to their vocal commitment is shocking!

“But Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good’” (Joshua 24:19-20).

What in the world is this? Why would he respond this way?

I think Joshua is concerned that their declaration is *a bit glib and overly casual*. He is suspicious of quick affirmations of faith that don’t first count the cost of discipleship. He probably was thinking of the many times in Israel’s past history where they loudly and passionately declared their loyalty to God only later to fall into all manner of idolatry. *Sentimental, romantic resolutions made in the heat of the moment often are the fruit of over-agitated emotion*. Joshua wants them to reckon with the reality of their own sinful inclination to fall into idolatry and to recognize that this is a deeply serious commitment, not some casual tip of the hat that they can later ignore with no consequences.

The reason they will not be able to serve God is because they thought they could do so while simultaneously holding on to the idols of the Canaanites whose land they had just entered. So Joshua gives them a stern warning:

His point in vv. 19-20 is that to make such a commitment and then to deliberately and wantonly and consciously forsake God and exchange him for idols is to provoke discipline and judgment. God always forgives the repentant, but those who sin with a high hand and forsake him will be subject to discipline.

But notice especially why this declaration of commitment is such a serious matter. It has to do with the character of God himself: *he is "holy" and "jealous"* (v. 19)!

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am *a jealous God*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exod. 20:4-5).

"For you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, *whose name is Jealous*, is a jealous God" (Exod. 34:14; see Deut. 4:24; 6:14-15; cf. 29:20; 32:16, 21; 1 Cor. 10:22)

Before you make this commitment, says Joshua, you need to understand the nature of this God to whom you are giving yourselves. His very name is Jealous! In the ancient world one's *name* was not merely a label or a tag, but a declaration of one's character. Thus, *in the very depths of God's divine character burns the fire of jealousy*. Jealousy is central to the fundamental essence of who God is. Jealousy is at the core of God's identity as God. Jealousy is that defining characteristic or personality trait that makes God God. Whatever other reasons you may find in Scripture for worshiping and serving and loving God alone, and there are many of them and they are all good, paramount among them all is the fact that our God burns with jealousy for the undivided allegiance and affection of His people.

Most of us have seen or felt or been on the receiving end of human jealousy that is destructive and sinful and ugly. We naturally recoil from the suggestion that God might to any degree be tainted with such a terrible flaw of character.

To say that God is jealous certainly does not mean that he is suspicious because of some insecurity in his heart. This kind of jealousy is the result of ignorance and mistrust. Such is surely not true of God. Nor does it mean he is wrongfully envious of the success of others. Jealousy that is sinful is most often the product of anxiety and bitterness and fear. But surely none of this could be true of God. Sinful jealousy is the sort that longs to possess and control what does not properly belong to oneself; it is demanding and cares little for the supposed object of its love.

Divine jealousy is zeal to protect a love relationship or to avenge it when it is broken. Jealousy in God is that passionate energy by which he is provoked and stirred and moved to take action against whatever or whoever stands in the way of his enjoyment of what he loves and desires. The intensity of God's anger at threats to this relationship is directly proportionate to the depths of his love.

This is no momentary or sporadic or infrequent or occasional burst of anger or minor irritation in the heart of God. This is no passing twinge in God's mind. This is the incessant, intensely persistent burning in the heart of the infinitely powerful, uncreated God. In the ancient near east, the word for "jealousy" literally meant to become intensely red, a reference to the effects of anger on one's facial complexion. Jealousy in God is not a "green-eyed monster" but a "*red-faced lover*" who will brook no rivals in his relationship with his people.

Knowing this to be true of God, the people persist in their response: "No, but we **will** serve the Lord" (v. 21).

Joshua's counsel is profound:

"O.K. Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel" (v. 23).

Guess what! *This sermon is about to become sexy after all!* Do you hear what Joshua is saying? He is telling the Israelites in no uncertain terms that **the root cause of lack of commitment is idolatry! The underlying explanation for why we are reluctant or ultimately refuse to commit ourselves wholly to God is that we are idolaters!**

***But how can you say that to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century***, given the fact that we don't typically turn from God and run off to the closest pagan shrine and literally bow down in front of a lifeless statue of marble or granite? None of us have never worshiped a wooden idol or are in the least inclined to burn incense to a golden calf or swear allegiance to a false god.

Let me give you one example to help explain how this applies to us. In Colossians 3:5, Paul wrote this: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, ***which is idolatry.***"

If covetousness is idolatry, then idolatry need not entail a statue of Buddha or genuflecting in a pagan temple. Idolatry is any tendency in the human heart to dethrone God for the sake of something else, whether that be money, sex, ambition, power, pride, or something as seemingly innocuous as respectability. ***To the extent that we give our affections to anything other than God on the assumption that it can do for our souls what he can't, we are guilty of idolatry.***

John Piper defines covetousness as "desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God" (*Future Grace*, 221). Thus the opposite of covetousness is resting satisfied with God. Covetousness is idolatry "because the contentment that the heart should be getting from God, it starts to get from something else" (ibid.). Covetousness, simply put, "is a heart divided between two gods" (ibid.).

When we begin to lose our contentment in Christ, that is to say, when we say that Christ isn't altogether adequate, we start to long for other things to satisfy our souls. We begin to say, "I must have something more than God to make me complete, an experience, event, or possession that I can't trust God to provide." In effect we elevate something above God in our esteem. We put our confidence in the promise of "things" and "stuff" and whatever money can purchase, believing the lie that there is a depth of joy and quality of life in it/them that can't be found in God.

***Anytime our pursuit of more stuff is driven or energized by the belief that it can fulfill the longing of our souls in ways that God cannot, we are guilty of idolatry.*** Granting any object or possession such a powerful place in our hearts, or to elevate it to a position of highest value, deserving of our utmost effort and attention, is to deify it. We in effect are "bowing the knee to another master." Our hearts are captive to a different "lord". We have, quite simply, violated the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

**Some of you won't commit to a local church to serve and give and sacrifice for others for the glory of God because you worship your own personal comfort and convenience. You have elevated above God your own individual freedom and the pleasure of using your time and money and energy to satisfy your soul's desire.**

**You won't commit to loving God only and living for God only and serving God only because you love, live for, and serve yourself! That's idolatry!**

Joshua said it as clearly as he could. Paul said it as clearly as he could. And now I'm saying it as clearly as I can: ***the alternative to commitment is idolatry!***

So let me close with the words of Joshua in v. 15, but with a slightly contemporary twist:

"Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of materialism and self-indulgence, or the gods of personal preservation and convenience. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."