

**“EVERY PROMISE HAS BEEN FULFILLED.”****JOSHUA 23**

I know this will come as a complete and shocking surprise to all of you today, but there are people out there who think sermons are a complete waste of time! Several years ago, a magazine called The British Weekly, published this provocative letter. “Dear Sir: It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister’s time might be more profitably spent on something else.” That letter resulted in several other editorial reactions, but it seemed that the following letter put the matter in proper perspective. “Dear Sir: I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals – mostly my wife’s cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.” I take great comfort in that observation for obvious reasons!

Our text today in the Old Testament book of Joshua is, for all intents and purposes, a sermon. It was the farewell sermon of Joshua, now a very old man, who had led the nation of Israel so wonderfully and skillfully for so many years. Some twenty years had passed since the day Joshua had led the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land of Canaan. Joshua spent the next twenty years constantly encouraging the people to get all that had been given to them – to possess fully what God wanted them to have. Like the Israelites, followers of Jesus have been given an inheritance. No, it’s not a physical, literal piece of land, but instead an abundant spiritual life made possible through and in Jesus who said, “...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10 NIV) Just as Israel had to get what had been given physically or literally, so you and I have to get what we’ve been given spiritually.

The leaders of the nation of Israel stood before Joshua. He knew he was about to die and there’s a note of deep concern in his words. Why is that? Joshua smelled indifference and compromise in the air. He perceived that too many Israelites were just content to settle down and share the land with the very people God had commanded them to drive out completely. Joshua knew that compromise leads to conformity and conformity leads to chaos for God’s people. Joshua explains in his farewell sermon how Israel could avoid such a scenario. It seems to me that Joshua calls the people to keep on doing three things. If they did those three things, it would ensure that they would enjoy fully God’s blessings in the years to come. I believe if we keep on doing the same three things, we will enjoy as much of God’s blessing as it’s possible to enjoy this side of Heaven. Here’s the first one:

**KEEP ON OBEYING GOD.**

Did you hear that in v. 6? “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.” (Josh 23:6 NIV) Obedience isn’t automatic and it doesn’t just happen on its own. Obeying God is a thoughtful, conscious decision to follow God’s leading and do life God’s way. As

Joshua knew only too well, it's all too easy for any of us to drift "to the right or to the left" instead of staying on course with what God wants us to do.

"Obedience." I must admit that my first image of that word is of a large, red-faced, angry parent towering over his or her small child and shouting, "You will obey me, or else!" But that isn't what it means to obey God. Instead, obeying God is an invitation to joy, wholeness and fulfillment in this life. Ever since the Garden of Eden when Satan convinced Adam and Eve that obeying God was just the worst kind of tyranny and slavery imaginable, we human beings continue to swallow Satan's lie hook, line and sinker. We assume that by asking us to obey Him, God is trying to deprive us of some happiness in life. Instead, He is trying to release His blessing into our lives.

In contrast, Jesus loved to obey God. There was nothing difficult, uncomfortable, or tyrannical in obeying His Father all the time in everything. Obeying His Father was perfect joy for Jesus because He knew that God was good and right in all He did. Jesus said things like this: "My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work." (John 4:34 NLT) and, also, "... but I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father." (John 14:31 NLT) Just like Jesus, you were created to live in submission to God. When you live life obeying Him - not just here and there, but consistently – that's when you start to discover real joy and real purpose in this life. But when you refuse to live life God's way you only open up your life to despair, chronic unhappiness, and a loss of fulfillment.

In his farewell sermon, Joshua says, "...cling tightly to the LORD your God as you have done until now." (Josh 23:8 NLT) That's so important to obeying God continually. Staying as close to God as possible both enables you to obey God and it results in obeying God even more. "Cling tightly" - Joshua's image is of two lovers embracing and hugging each other. When you are careful to obey God, you are clinging tightly, sticking closely and holding on to God. Does that happen all by itself? Of course not! There has to be an intentional effort on your part and mine to have and then maintain that kind of relationship with God. You have to be intentional about clinging tightly to God!

Does obeying God matter that much to Him? Do you remember Saul, Israel's first king? On one occasion, God commanded him to destroy one of Israel's enemies – the Amalekites – utterly and absolutely – even down to the animals and property belonging to the Amalekites. Everything and everyone was to be wiped out. Instead, Saul spared the king of the Amalekites and their best sheep and cattle. The Lord sent a prophet by the name of Samuel to confront King Saul. Saul sees him coming and says, "God bless you, Samuel! I hope you can see that I carried out the Lord's instructions." Samuel says, "Why, then, do I hear sheep bleating and cows mooing?" King Saul says, "Well, I spared the best of the sheep and the cattle to sacrifice as a burnt offering to God." Well, that does sound spiritual and pious, doesn't it? But Saul says this to Samuel and all of us need to hear it, "Do you think all GOD wants are sacrifices—empty rituals just for show? He wants you to listen to him! Plain listening is the thing, not staging a lavish religious production. Not doing what GOD tells you is far worse than fooling around in the occult." (1 Sam 15:22-23 MSG) Actually obeying God is better than learning how to

spout off all sorts of spiritual, pious words. Doing what God says to do after today's worship service is more important than what you say to God or sing about God in today's worship service. Above all and in all, God desires simple obedience to His will and ways. When you obey God and keep on obeying Him in your everyday, walk around life, you will get what you've been given.

There is always a high cost in disobeying God. God rejected King Saul as the leader of His people after that incident I just described. And here Joshua warns Israel that they would forfeit God's power if they failed to finish the job of driving out their godless Canaanite neighbors. Joshua knew that many Israelites just longed to be like many of their godless neighbors. Sadly, history proved him right. Israel eventually became an idol-worshipping, disobedient group of people. Here's a sobering thought we would be wise to remember. God will allow His people to disobey Him and, as a result, chose heartache and disaster for themselves. If that was true of Israel, the same principle applies to you and me. When we choose to disobey God, you can fully expect two results: heartache and disaster. And so very often, it's not just a gigantic, whopping, big sin or act of disobedience that does us in. Often, it just what you might call "cumulative disobedience" – disobedience in a lot of little areas of our lives that strip away from us the joy of living in careful obedience to Jesus.

A Haitian pastor offers an uncomfortable parable. A certain man wanted to sell his home for \$2,000. Another man wanted to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After some bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for just \$1,000 with one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one nail protruding from just over the front door which the new owner could not remove. After several years, the original owner wanted to buy the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell it. So, the first owner went out and found the carcass of a dead dog and hung it on that single nail he still owned. The second owner was forbidden by law from removing it. Soon the whole house became unlivable and he was forced to sell the house to the man who owned the nail. Here's how that Haitian pastor explained the point of his parable. If you leave the Devil with even one small nail in your life, he will return and hang his rotting garbage making your life unfit for Jesus to occupy. How can you get all that God has given you? Keep on obeying God. Secondly...

### **KEEP ON SEPARATING YOURSELF UNTO GOD.**

In his farewell sermon, Joshua talks a whole lot about separation – so much so that I suggest that if you and I are going to enjoy fully God's blessing in this life we are going to have to separate ourselves unto God. Now, what does that mean? Well, let's understand Joshua's perspective first. God made it very clear that the Israelites were to remain totally separate from their Canaanite neighbors in every conceivable area of life. This separation was far more than just worshiping different gods. God's people were not to intermarry with Canaanites, not to do business with Canaanites and not to adopt any Canaanite culture. They were to worship a completely different God and have a completely separate lifestyle. Joshua knew that the influence of the Canaanites would have a negative, spiritual effect on the Israelites – the rejection of the one, true God.

How are we to understand all of that today? On the one hand, God's demand of separation from the Canaanites, driving them out of the land and killing them off sounds pretty barbaric, cruel and intolerant to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. This was God-sanctioned genocide. On the other hand, it's wise to remember that some cultures historically have become so evil, wicked, and foul that God, the Judge of the Universe, decides that they are beyond redemption. God had already decided to wipe out Canaanite culture completely. Israel was simply His means of executing that judgment. Frankly, I believe this was a one of a kind situation back then and there. God never intended it to have an ongoing, literal application. I don't believe God sanctions literal genocide today. Even so, it's up to God to decide if a culture or a person is beyond redemption – not us!

There is an important spiritual application, however. If I understand both Jesus and the rest of the New Testament correctly, it can be summed up in this statement: God's people are to be in the world but not of the world. Some Christians believe that God's people should have as little to do with non-Christians as possible. That was pretty much the message of the spiritual environment I grew up in. The clear message was that more bad things happen when Christians spend time with non-Christians than good things. Christians will get tempted to adopt sinful attitudes or engage in sinful behavior. When I was growing up, the message I got was, "Do as little with non-Christian people as possible. Separate yourself from them. You will be tempted to compromise your faith, so the safest and best thing to do is to have nothing to do with them."

Now, there is a certain amount of truth to that way of thinking. Some Christians do compromise their faith as a result of the influence of non-Christians. And there are certainly some ungodly people and many ungodly situations that we should all run away from as fast as possible! So, how then can we be in the world but not of the world? We are called to be "in the world." The simple fact is that we are going to rub shoulders with plenty of non-Christian people every day for the rest of our lives! I believe both Jesus and the entire New Testament expects you and me to associate with and even become friends of people who do not share our faith. The New Testament assumes that people without Jesus will see the difference Jesus can make in their own lives by interacting with Christians in meaningful ways. How can that ever happen if we are busy avoiding relationships and interaction with them?

So, then, what does it mean to be "not of the world?" It means separating ourselves from sin, not from sinners. What God wants us to say "No" to is not sinful people, but instead the sinful attitudes, the sinful behavior, the sinful values, the sinful priorities, and the sinful lifestyles that so dominate and control the lives of people who don't follow Jesus. You know that you can love people without loving what they do. If you've been a parent, you understand that principle very well. You love your kids, but you don't love everything they do! We are called to love non-Christians, interact with them, befriend them and point them to Jesus without adopting their ungodly attitudes and behavior.

Is it hard to be in the world, but not of the world? Yes, it can be very hard! In fact, the problem with many of us is that we can resemble our non-Christian neighbors a bit too

much. We can worship the same gods: money, the things that money can buy, success, luxury – just to name a few. We live in a culture that’s all about consumerism. Everything in life is supposed to serve the purpose of making you happy and meeting your needs – grocery stores, department stores, banks, schools, movies, sports – it’s all pervasive. We Christians can bring that same consumer attitude into the local church. Church becomes all about meeting your own needs rather than glorifying God. It takes real wisdom and discernment to be in the world, but not of the world.

Just like the word “obedience”, this concept of being separated unto God can have a kind of negative feel or ring to it. So, here’s a positive slant on it. This is really all about being separated unto God which is about far more than just not sinning. Here’s an analogy. When a man and a woman decide to get married they choose each other. The act of choosing each other in marriage demands that they separate themselves from all other men and women, right? What would you think of a woman about to be married who says, “Well, darn it. Just think of all those cute guys I won’t be able to date anymore....” What would you think of a man the day before his wedding saying, “I’m really bummed out. Just think of all those beautiful gals I’ll be depriving of me after tomorrow....” Wouldn’t you say, “Those two should not be getting married”? For a man and a woman truly in love, it’s a wonderful joy to separate themselves from all others so that they can have each other exclusively and forever.

When you become a follower of Jesus, the same sort of thing ought to happen. In a sense, you get married to Jesus. You become His exclusively. He becomes yours forever. You gladly turn away from every other allegiance and any other loyalty so that you can belong to Him totally and completely. That should be the greatest joy imaginable! If you see it as a burden, then your love for Jesus is very shallow. It’s suspect. If you’re going to cling to God, you are going to have to let go of some other stuff. And that should be done gladly - like when you forsake all others gladly to marry your spouse. Keep on obeying God. Keep on separating yourself unto God. Finally...

### **KEEP ON LOVING GOD.**

Joshua says something in his farewell sermon that might sound a little odd at first. “So be very careful to love the LORD your God.” (Josh 23:11 NLT) How can you “be careful” to love someone? Doesn’t it make it sound like loving God must be something very intentional, very deliberate, and very thoughtful? That’s exactly right. Loving God is always more than just warm, happy feelings about God that can come and go. Does it surprise you that God commands you to love Him here? He does! The Bible says, “And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” (Deut 6:5 NLT) It also says, “... what does the LORD your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the LORD your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul.” (Deut 10:12 NLT)

Real love, genuine love, authentic love is always a deliberate choice and an ongoing decision. Feelings of love are wonderful in any relationship and to be thoroughly enjoyed, but those feelings aren’t love in and of themselves. You love God when you

obey God. You love God when you respect Him enough to do what He says to do. You love God when you walk in His ways and do life His way. In case you're tempted to think this is just an Old Testament kind of thing, Jesus described what it means to be His follower in exactly the same way, "If you love me, obey my commandments.... Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me.... Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me...." (John 14:15, 21, 24 NLT) You love Jesus when you obey Him, do what Jesus says and do life Jesus' way. But let's not making loving God or loving Jesus something gloomy or heavy! Far from it! You were made to love God and to find your greatest joy in loving Him. Love God and His joy will fill you. Love God and His grace will transform you. Love God and His peace will flood your life. Love God and His mercy will forgive your sins. Love God and you will discover life with a capital L.

Joshua reminds the Israelites that one way God demonstrates His love for us is in and through His faithfulness to us. In his farewell sermon, he reminds them of all that God has done on their behalf. "...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." (Josh 23:14 NIV) Isn't that just as true for you and me? Every promise God has made to you has been fulfilled or will be fulfilled. Not one of them has failed or will fail. You can love God, but there's just no way you can ever "outlove" God. His love for you is far greater than any love you will ever have for Him!

It was the great Christian leader, Augustine, who said, "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love." A woman was having some problems so she sought out treatment from a psychiatrist. At their first session, the doctor established that this woman was a wife and a mother of three small children. He asked, "Which of your three children do you love the most? Instantly, she answered, "Well, I love all three of my kids the same." He felt her answer was almost too quick, too glib. He decide to probe a bit. "Come on now, you really love all three of your children the same?" "Yes, that's right," the woman said, "I love each of them exactly the same. The psychiatrist said, "Come off it now.... It's psychologically impossible for anyone to regard any three human beings exactly the same. I'm not sure you're being as honest with me as I need you to be for us to continue this session." With this the woman broke down a little and said, "Oh, all right, I don't love all three of my children exactly the same. When one of them is sick, I love that one more. When one of them is in pain, I love that child more. When one of my kids is confused, I love that one more. And when one of my children is bad – not just naughty, I mean really bad – I love that child more."

How do we get what we've been given spiritually? Joshua's farewell sermon provides great insight: Keep on obeying God. Keep on separating yourself unto God. Keep on loving God. And one of the most wonderful things about God is the fact that you can never "outlove" Him. Does God love everyone? Yes. The Bible says so. Does God love all of His children the same? I suppose He does. But something in my soul tells me that when you're sick, when you're in pain, when you're confused, and when you mess up in life – not just a little sin, but when you really blow it bigtime – God loves you even more. "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love."