

**“AS FOR ME AND MY FAMILY”****JOSHUA 24:14-15**

Mother Teresa was known for her commitment to serve the poor, the homeless, and the oppressed. On one of her many travels, she spoke at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. A woman heard Mother Teresa speak and asked her afterwards, “What can we do to help you?” Mother Teresa turned to her quietly and said, “Love your family.” That was an unexpected response. Here was this great Christian woman totally invested in ministry to the poor all over the world, but when asked what someone could do to help, she simply said, “Love your family.” Mother Teresa knew what the Bible teaches. Our faith must start with those closest to us.

Today, we’re experiencing a worship service with a unique focus. We call it Cross-Generations because all the generations of our church family (except the very youngest) worship God together. We’re acknowledging and celebrating the fact that the Christian faith applies to men, women, boys, and girls of every age and gets passed down from one generation to another. It got me thinking about the importance of the family itself in helping us begin and keep a strong faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

Jaden’s already read our Scripture passage, but let me explain what’s happening in that scene. The Israelites – the Old Testament people of God – had taken control of the land of Canaan. God had given the land to them as a gift. Joshua was their leader, but he was now a very old man. He knew he would die soon. Joshua chapter 24 is his farewell speech to the Israelites. Today, I want us to focus on just those two verses Jaden read – 24:14-15. Joshua is challenging the people to keep God forever at the center of everything they do. Obey Him. Love Him. Serve Him. In the midst of that challenge, we hear some strong words of personal conviction: “As for me and my family,” Joshua says, “we will serve the Lord.” I hear at least three truths about faith and what it means to have a relationship with God in those words. Joshua’s simple statement applies to everyone here regardless of your age. Here’s the first one:

**REAL FAITH IS PERSONAL.**

Picture the scene with me. Joshua stood up and looked out across a great gathering of people. He already knew many of his fellow Israelites would be strongly tempted to worship other gods. Sometimes it’s easier to worship something you can see and touch like an idol made of stone or wood than the one, true God who is invisible. Joshua told the people they must make a choice. Their faith had to be something personal or else they, too, would end up worshipping idols like their neighbors. That’s one reason he said, “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15 NLT) It’s as if he said, “Look, I already know that not everyone here today is going to worship and serve the Lord. If you choose not to do so, you’ll have to answer for yourself. But I want you to know where I stand today. I have chosen my God and I know He is the one, true God. Everyone else may turn away and worship other gods, but not me. I will only ever serve the one, true God.”

That's a wonderful statement all by itself, isn't it? What makes it even more wonderful is the fact Joshua was a husband, father, grandfather, and probably a great-grandfather as well. If you're a parent, grandparent, or a great-grandparent, your faith in and allegiance to Jesus must be personal if it's going to have any impact on your children or the rest of your family. That might seem obvious to you today, but it's not so obvious to everyone. Over the years, I've heard parents say to me things like, "Yeah, it's important to have my kids go to church because there they can learn the difference between good and bad behavior." That may be true, but it misses the point. Real faith is more than learning how to be a nice or a good person. The Bible makes it clear that real faith begins with a personal relationship with the one, true God through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Sure, treating other people well and having high morals are inevitable results of knowing God personally, but they never create a relationship with God. There are many very nice, very moral people who live next door to us, work in the next office, or go to school with us, but they don't love or know Jesus personally.

Some parents seem to believe the Christian faith is something you learn about as a kid, but it's probably OK to outgrow it as an adult. You know, it's nice to expose kids to the stories about Noah's ark, David and Goliath, and Daniel and the lion's den. It's good to have them learn something about who Jesus was and what He did. All very positive and worthwhile stuff. But when they get older, it's not really expected they keep on pursuing a personal relationship with Jesus diligently. Being a Christian is reduced to believing certain truths which have little or no impact on your actual, everyday life. It certainly isn't thought of as being a vital, personal relationship with another Person – God Himself! A real faith – spiritual authenticity – is anything but a joyless, "heavy on the rules" experience. A godly home should be the most joyful, positive, peaceful, fun and encouraging place of all. There ought to be a kind of a spiritual atmosphere in a godly home that allows even doubts about God to be shared and fears about life to be expressed honestly. A godly home is just a place where God is included in everything. Real faith is about relating to God as naturally as someone breathing oxygen.

What children need to see above all else is spiritual authenticity. Mom and Dad, grandparents, any and every adult here today, that means we need to have our own personal relationship with God. It needs to be real, growing, and vital to us if it's going to have any impact on younger generations. Modeling good behavior is important. Bringing kids to church regularly is important. Praying together before meals is important. But, above all and in all, kids need to see that God is real to you and me. They need to see that Jesus is at the center of our lives and everything in our lives revolves around Him. We live in a day and age that has as many idols as the people living around the Israelites. No, they aren't idols of wood, stone, and metal. People today worship things like money, wealth, success, celebrity, possessions, and achieving your potential. It can be easy to give a kind of lip service to God while we actually worship and serve the idols our culture says we should. So, Mom and Dad, grandparents, every adult here today, who do you really worship? Is your faith real? Is the one, true God really at the center of your life? Are you truly following Jesus? Kids figure it out. When they hear our words, observe our choices, and witness our decisions, what do they learn about who or what we truly worship and serve? Real faith

is never just tacked onto your life. It is life! “As for me,” said Joshua, “I will serve the Lord.” Real faith is always and forever personal. Something else about real faith...

### **REAL FAITH INCLUDES MY FAMILY.**

What did Joshua say again? “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15 NLT) Joshua had the audacity to speak for his wife, his children, his grandchildren, maybe even his great-grandchildren. All of them, said Joshua, are going to love, worship, and serve the Lord just like me! Not only was Joshua’s faith in God intensely personal, but it was big enough to involve and include his entire family. Some Christian parents underestimate their ability to influence and impact their kids spiritually. Now, it’s true no one can make the decision for you to become Jesus’ follower – even the most prayerful, impactful parent you might imagine. It’s absolutely true that every person must choose Jesus for himself or herself. Not one of us here today will be able to walk through the gates of Heaven by saying, “Well, Mom and Dad got me baptized” or “My parents took me to church a lot.”

Francis Chan has been a megachurch pastor and is still a well-known author and speaker. Even he discovered he couldn’t make his own daughter fall in love with Jesus. She was a teenager at the time. He spent nights crying, bawling, and praying to the Lord. Here he was known for his ability to communicate, but there was nothing he could do for his own daughter that would make her fall in love with Jesus. He could still guide and lead her, but he was powerless to convict her. So he prayed, “God, either your Spirit comes into her or your Spirit doesn’t. It doesn’t matter how great a dad I am. I cannot bring her to life.” One day she came into Francis’ room and said, “You were right, Dad. The Holy Spirit was not in me. But now He is.” She talked about how near she was to God and how everything had changed. Francis and his wife were skeptical. They wanted to see evidence of change. Some eighteen months later, both could see spiritual transformation in their daughter. They didn’t do that. It was the Holy Spirit.

No, you can’t make your kids follow Jesus, but the Bible assumes parents and grandparents are in the best position to evangelize and disciple their own children and grandchildren. No pastor, no youth director, no church school teacher is better equipped to lead your children or grandchildren into a saving knowledge of Jesus than you! Someone has rightly observed, “Christianity is only one generation away from extinction.” Here Joshua dared to assume that when it comes to spiritual things, he could speak for his entire extended family. His faith was big enough to include his entire family. They, along with him, will serve the Lord! Joshua assumed he had a kind of holy authority from God to lead his family into faithful worship of and service to God.

Joshua was a parent, a grandparent, a great-grandparent who wasn’t afraid to spiritually lead his own extended family. You can be so careful not to scare your family members away from God that you fail to point them to God! Some Christian parents insist their kids get up every morning for school and brook no dissent from them whatsoever (and rightly so), but those same children are given the option of going to church, the option of participating in church school, or the option of being involved in youth group activities.

What is that about? Really? I guess an education isn't optional, but a relationship with God is optional. That's not forcing personal faith on your kids! Why can't parents say, "Look, kids, we can't force you to put your faith and trust in Jesus. You can only ever do that for yourselves. But, as your parents, we've decided this will be a Christian home. We will serve God in this family and try to conform our lives to His will and standards. An important part of all that is to worship God and study His Word with other followers of Jesus consistently. So as long as you live in this home, this is where all of us are going to be on Sunday morning!" What's wrong with that? Sure, our kids will challenge that resolve from time to time. That's what they do! So, Mom and Dad, do what you need to do. You don't have to get belligerent or angry about it. Just firmly and lovingly insist on what you know is right and best for your children in the long run even if they don't like it then and there. They'll get over it! What they may never get over or recover from is parents or grandparents who fail to point them to Jesus.

Something else stands out to me about Joshua's statement. As a man, he accepted the responsibility of spiritual leadership for his family and didn't dump it on Mrs. Joshua. Too often, the wife and mother is the spiritual leader rather than the husband and the father. Sadly, too many men delegate spiritual leadership to the women. Now, thank God for godly mothers and grandmothers who refuse to drop the ball. But, men, we can and should do better. Joshua is an example of a man who set the pace, took the lead, and wasn't reluctant to say, "Come on, family, we're going to pursue God and do life His way." There's something wonderful when you see the Lordship of Jesus displayed in the men of a family. Joshua was just such a man. "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." Of course, spiritual leadership isn't always easy. We sin. We fail. We fall short. Family members learn quickly we're not perfect. But the solution is never found in giving up. Let's admit our shortcomings. Let's ask for forgiveness. Let's learn to rely on the Holy Spirit in deeper ways. Insisting that our faith is big enough to involve our entire family takes perseverance and effort, but the payoff is tremendous.

### **REAL FAITH IS PRACTICAL.**

Joshua said, "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15 NLT) A relationship with God is more than just believing the right things about Him. God has brought us into a new and eternal relationship with Him so we can discover the great joy of serving Him. Notice that serving the Lord – making our faith practical and real – is a conscious decision. Joshua said, "We will serve the Lord." No one has ever served God accidentally. No one just sort of fell into it by mistake. Serving the Lord only happens when as adults, teenagers, or children we decide we will serve the Lord. We live in a culture saturated by the idea that everything and everyone pretty much exists to meet my needs. Even God! Many people kind of think God exists to forgive my sins, meet my needs, get me out of trouble, and provide Heaven to me when I die. But the Bible makes it clear we were created to live for and serve God.

Serving the Lord can be done in very down to earth, practical, everyday ways. Showing compassion to someone at school or someone at work who no one seems to like. Taking a meal to a sick neighbor. Letting someone know you are praying for him or her

and really doing it. Inviting someone to come to church with you. Telling someone that Jesus loves him or her and what He did for them. Being involved in a ministry opportunity here at church or out in the community. Mom and Dad, what do your kids see? Do they see you so totally absorbed in your job, or in your own recreational activities, or even being so devoted to their teams or their extracurricular activities that you have no time to read the Bible, to pray, or to serve in a ministry of our church? Will kids learn that serving God is just an empty phrase that makes you feel good or a way of relating to God that's down to earth and practical?

Serving God means we give a portion of our time, our talents, and our financial treasure to build God's Kingdom. Mom and Dad, what do our kids see? Do you use the abilities the Holy Spirit put into you to somehow and in some way point people to Jesus? Do they see you meeting the needs of other people in practical ways? Do you pray together for people who are hurting or struggling? Have you ever shared with them a spiritual conversation you had with someone who is not a follower of Jesus? Do they see you involved in something – anything – here at church or out in the community for which you say, "You know, kids, I do this because I love Jesus!" Do they know that you tithe your income to the Lord's work? What are we teaching our kids about what it means to serve God? Are they learning that it's just so much religious jargon – "Christianese" or "church-ese" – or do they experience serving God as a very practical, everyday demonstration that He is the center and focus of our lives? "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord."

I read about an unusual experiment. A bottle cork, weighing less than one ounce, was suspended by a thread alongside a very heavy steel bar which was also hanging attached to a metal chain. Side by side. The cork was set in motion mechanically so it would swing and hit that steel bar over and over and over again. For a while, there was nothing to see. The cork swung back and forth hitting the bar. The bar remained motionless for a long time. Then it happened. It was about the smallest movement you could imagine. The steel bar trembled just a bit. As the cork continued to impact it, it shuddered, got quiet again, then shuddered again. The cork just continued to impact the steel bar until it, too, picked up the rhythm of the swinging cork. In another half an hour, its work finished, the cork was cut down and the heavy steel bar kept swinging back and forth steadily and rhythmically just like a pendulum.

The effect of real faith is like that little cork. Sometimes it's hard to see any impact or influence even on those closest to you. But keep at it. Don't give up. Make the most of every opportunity. Real faith is personal. Real faith includes my family. Real faith is practical. Would you say it with me today? "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." May God help our declaration of faith become reality!