

A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

Joshua 23-24

Rev. Todd G. Leupold, PBC, January 3, 2010 PM Special "Family Service"

INTRODUCTION:

This morning our text touched on what Scripture calls the 'unforgivable sin,' which is simply the willful rejection of Christ's forgiveness. At the same time, I dared to commit what many men would consider 'unforgivable' – pulling the cover off the elephant that's been in the room and ignored for years. This evening, I intend to lead us in examining this elephant and ultimately present an opportunity to choose what to do with it.

It should be no surprise or secret that our fellowship continues to struggle in a multiplicity of ways. Chiefly, there continues to be fluctuating levels of disunity, tension, uncertainty and discord. These are serious issues and legitimate threats to the fulfillment of our purpose and mission as a church: **a family of imperfect people with imperfect leaders who are unrelenting in our desires and efforts to be like Jesus in character and in action - loving God absolutely and loving others sacrificially; committed to this for the benefit of all (in and outside of the church) and, most of all, to the glory of God!** We do a great job living out the first part ("imperfect people with imperfect leaders"), but we continue to struggle mightily with being a family or fulfilling the rest of our purpose and mission ("unrelenting in our desires and efforts to be like Jesus in character and in action - **loving God absolutely and loving others sacrificially**; committed to this for the benefit of all (in and outside of the church) and, most of all, to the glory of God!").

Yes, there are seemingly countless secondary issues, problems, errors and failures that we *could* spend the rest of our lives focusing on, complaining, debating, and even fighting over. However, as the church should have learned by now after approximately 30 years of the same repeating, cyclical issues, problems and results, obsessing over and just addressing *these* things will not substantively change much of anything – and certainly not for long.

If we are serious about **God's** will and mission for His Local Body in Perth, NY; *if* we are serious about being a healthy and faithful Body of Christ and witness to our community; *if* we are serious about Biblically, appropriately, and effectively resolving our problems and re-building **God's** church; *then* we have to recognize and address our Core Problem. *Only then*, can we effectively address any of the secondary ones.

What, then, is our "Core Problem." I believe, without question, it is one of **Identity**. Or, more specifically, a lack of a *unified* identity which itself is the result of a lack of agreement and commitment in both word and deed, mind, heart, and spirit, to a clear, set standard of our shared beliefs, allegiance, expectations, governance, purpose, objectives and priorities. In turn, the result is far too much interaction and debate full of and built upon: "who says?," "you can't," "I won't," "but I think/feel/have the opinion," "I don't have to listen," "you have to listen," "that doesn't apply to me," "I never agreed/'signed up for' that," "I don't like it, so you can't," "if you, then I'll," "I don't care, I still demand," etc. . . Brothers & sisters, unity and identity are impossible under such circumstances and so is fulfilling God's purpose in and through us.

With this in mind, I ask that we look at the Biblical record of another time that God's people faced a similar danger and critical juncture. Then, in this light, we will return to how we can and must address our circumstances in a Biblical manner.

PRAYER

JOSHUA 23:1-5

- Joshua 23 provides a theological explanation for the whole history of Israel, before and after. In particular, it addresses why Israel – though uniquely offered God's greatest blessings - so often has and continues to live as a cursed people who cannot seem to escape conflict, scarcity, wandering, division, exile and oppression.
- Growing old in years and fearful of Israel's future, Joshua engages them in a distinctive and powerful covenant renewal ceremony.
- Having gathered all of the appropriate representatives of all the people, God's appointed and anointed spiritual leader begins by defining Israel through her own history. Not who she believes herself to be, but who she has proven to be.
- The lesson is that, apart from God's divine presence and assistance on her behalf, Israel would have no identity.
- Further, they are to see that even as God faithfully fulfills His promises, He still has a new task to put before them. Resting and basking upon the past is never an option.

JOSHUA 23:6-8

- The task ahead, however, is not about military conquest, expanded possessions, or a growing nation, but rather unmistakably is stated in terms of obedience to God's Will without hesitation or exception!
- Faithfulness to God and God alone is the task, and this is the unique characteristic that Israel's identity depends upon.
- This call to absolute allegiance and obedience to one God and Him alone was unheard of and unique in Israel's world. In all of the other cultures and religions, it was expected that different problems and desires were addressed through the appropriately different god, charm, incantation, or ritual. Our world is no different, just less obvious to us.
- There was always some circumstance, some problem, some desire that God was not addressing in the way and time that the people insisted must be. Dissatisfied and impatient, they then turned to another source. Sometimes, a false god. Sometimes, a false teacher. Another time, the example or power of a neighboring people. Other times, to their own instincts, assumptions, material wealth and/or abilities.
- Here, then, Joshua admonishes them that true strength is unquestioned obedience of God according to His Word and appointed messengers.

JOSHUA 23:9-16

- The LORD has already proven Himself faithful, but His people yet need to demonstrate their faithfulness to Him!
- In a world of conflict and challenge, the LORD's expected response from His people is one of uncompromisingly loyal and complete love. **v. 11**
- Anything else is ultimately a turning to 'other gods.' There will be syncretism of association and therefore syncretism of peoples, families, tribes and nations. When any of this happens, God's people lose their unique identity. This must be avoided at all costs!
- In urgent Truth, the call to obedience quickly and stunningly turns to a warning of dire punishment for disobedience of any kind or degree. If Israel is not loyal to Yahweh, He will not continue to loyally champion and bless her. Without him, she will not only lose her identity, but eventually everything else as well – peace, blessing, unity, land, freedom, hope.
- To break one's covenant with God is to demand His wrath and the loss of everything. Turn from complete reliance upon and allegiance in Him, even a little, and the cost will be aimless wandering, destruction, death, and the disintegration of the unity and identity as His people.

JOSHUA 24:1-13

- This next chapter begins with a reiteration of Joshua speaking before all Israel and in the name of the LORD God Almighty. In fact, the LORD so emphasizes that Joshua's words are His words, that He takes the unusual step of speaking through him in the 1st rather than 3rd person.
- Again, the theme of the whole chapter is the serving of 'other gods.' Idolatry. It is a fundamental issue of true strength and dependence of relationship. On Israel's part, is it in God Alone, or is it in God plus someone or something 'other'?
- With this as both background and the weaving thread, the LORD reminds the people of Israel of their entire historic relationship with Him. Throughout this history is a constant see-saw between God's faithfulness and the people's looking elsewhere for their needs and desires.
- All of their blessings have been the result of God and God alone. Always a result of God's choice and action, and never human choice, action or power.
- This is the people's identity: a people blessed solely through Yahweh, by His choice and mercy and their dependence upon Him!

JOSHUA 24:14-15

- **v. 14** “*Therefore...*” Because of this history and unique identity, the LORD declares, it is necessary that Israel renew her covenant before the LORD. Otherwise, as she turns from Him so He will turn from her.
- Joshua assumes the role of advocate and pleads with them to do what is necessary for a positive verdict and future. Specifically, he demands they take two earnest actions.
- **First**, they are to be restored to a proper relationship with the LORD. Such a relationship is based on reverent fear rather than implied entitlement. Sincere worship rather than using the rituals and form of worship to procure favor and personal benefit. Worship that is fundamentally an absolute recognition, acceptance and surrender to Truth, rather than a thing limited to self-definition and expression.
- **Second**, they must utterly eliminate any other claims to lordship of or over any area of their lives – physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual.
- Scholar and commentator, Trent C. Butler expounds: “*The proper relationship includes the proper attitude of reverence and awe in response to the majestic acts of God and the proper action of service in its widest sense. Such service is qualified by a pair of terms. 'Totally' . . . In reference to men . . . is the action expected of the people with their rulers (Judg 9:16, 19). . . The other element describing service of God is 'faithfully' . . . It designates a quality within men that cannot be presupposed, that of trustworthiness and faithfulness in speech and deed in relationship to other people and to God. Joshua thus demands an attitude and actions which are beyond the normal, expected attitudes and actions of men. He demands the same type of response to God that God has already shown to men, that of total loyalty and dedication . . . Joshua calls for proper allegiance, on which basis he can then call for a change of practice*” (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 7, pp. 272-273)
- With that, Joshua insists that those who claim to be God's people must publicly, clearly and absolutely choose their true and full allegiance. There are only two choices, no others, nothing in-between, and no mixing. Yeah or nay.
- He himself leads with his own commitment and pledge.

JOSHUA 24:16-18

- The people, acknowledging with flowering description the ways in which the LORD had delivered them, echo Joshua's covenantal pledge.

JOSHUA 24:19-24

- Yet, Joshua is neither satisfied nor done with them. *Why? Didn't they respond as they were supposed to and asked to?*
- Yes and no. They have uttered the words with their lips, but they have not fully committed their hearts. They have emphasized their devotion and allegiance to God when He delivers and blesses them, but stop short and remain silent about their devotion and allegiance when that is not so certain or obvious.
- Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Joshua exhorts the people that no matter what their words or rituals, they are incapable of true allegiance to and worship of the LORD because of the condition of their hearts and spirits.
- It is not enough, he says, simply to worship the LORD based on what He has done and/or what it is desired He will yet do. Such an attitude and limited, insincere devotion will inevitably lead back to their repeated history: turning to whichever source they believe will most grant their desires with the least demands in that particular circumstance and time.
- **NO, Joshua declares, the LORD must be worshiped not for what He does but for who He IS!**
- **First, in full appreciation of His Holiness!** Absolute purity, perfection, truth and righteousness before which all else is unquestionably unworthy.
- **Second, in reverent fear of His jealousy.** Let us again consider the words of Dr. Butler: “. . . *God is jealous and zealous . . . Yahweh's uniqueness lies precisely in his jealousy over against his worshipers. He loves them so much that he wants their undivided love in return. He will not share them . . . God turns his jealous indignation against the unfaithful worshiper, not against the rival lover*” (pg. 275).
- Again, the people responded in the affirmative to worship the LORD.
- Joshua then swears the people in to their covenant with the LORD, with themselves as witnesses and therefore only themselves to blame and by their own testimony to be judged.
- They accept this, but still God's appointed leader is not done. One more time, he impresses upon them the necessity of absolute, uncompromised devotion as a sacrificial offering of their very hearts – the center of their will and emotion.
- Again, they affirm their covenant to worship Him and this time even add in a verbal commitment to obedience.
- And so, Joshua and the people sealed their renewed covenant before the LORD and the people went on “***each to his own inheritance.***” That is, each to receive just what he or she deserves according to the covenant they have made!

THEN WHAT, HOW DID IT END?

Despite their public covenant and re-affirmation of obedient faith, the people continued to consistently turn from total dependence on God to dependence on other things, people or even themselves whenever circumstances were different than what they wanted or they considered God's demands more than they liked. Thus, Israel's history has been one of perpetual disappointment; back-and-forth between blessing and curse, success and defeat, plenty and want; independence and oppression.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO US TODAY?

- We are a people of God who struggle to truly commit to and worship Him.
- We are a people who can also be quick to turn from utter dependence upon the LORD, to dependence on idols. In some cases, because we are impatient. Others, because we fear our circumstances more than we fear God. In some, the desires of our hearts lie elsewhere. In still others, it just seems easier and less demanding another way.
- We are torn between allegiance to Jesus and to our idols. An idol is anything we place our hope and trust in other than Jesus to meet our needs or satisfy our desires. Our idol can be other religions. It can also be other 'things': money, fame, approval, alcohol, drugs, education, possessions, career, pornography, hobbies, entertainment, the latest fad, power, influence, popularity, accomplishments, 'winning.' Or, it can be relationships: other people, ourselves, a celebrity of some sort, a virtual world, a clique.
- We too, then, need to recognize what it is that divides and what it is that unites us together in a unique identity as God's redeemed people in this family called Perth Bible Church!

What Divides?

Worldview
Individualism
Emotionalism
Unforgiveness
Flesh
Malice
“Your/Mine/Our”

What Unites?

Scripture
Submission
Shared Passion
Forgiveness
Spirit
Love
God's

Illustration: Roman Galley in black water and dead calm. (refer to slide)

OUR CHOICE TO RENEW OUR COVENANT

- **To worship and obey the LORD**
- **To the authority of Scripture**
- **To our PBC Constitution (highlights)**
- **To our PBC Covenant**

“As for me and my house . . .”