

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 8, 2023

Commitment and Recommitment

Joshua 24:14-28

You're here in this place of worship because you made a choice to come. By putting it that way, I'm not trying to deny the sovereignty of God. I realize that God's saving will and purpose are still the primary reason you're in this Sunday morning assembly. Ultimately, God does the gathering. But not in a way that eliminates your freedom to act, to choose, to participate. You made a choice to be with others in this house of worship.

And that choice has to do with loyalty. In fact, worship is an act of loyalty. When you sing and pray and give and listen to the Word, you're participating in a declaration of allegiance. You're expressing your exclusive devotion to the God who has revealed himself to us most fully through Jesus Christ and has acted through him for our salvation. This choice for the God of Jesus Christ is also a choice against anything or anyone else that wants to claim your highest love and your deepest loyalty.

This means that congregational worship is bad news for idols. When God's people assemble like we have this morning, there's no room for dual allegiance. We can't serve both the Lord and idols. Our acts of adoration and devotion are directed exclusively toward the holy and jealous God who has rescued us and made us his people through Christ. So by showing up for worship, you've made a statement. You're declaring that God, and God alone, is worthy of praise. God, and God alone, is to be exalted. God, and God alone, can save. God, and God alone, deserves our full and unreserved commitment.

"But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (v. 15). That's the memorable call to commitment issued by Joshua in this morning's Scripture passage. Joshua formulates this altar call in clear and unmistakable terms. You can serve God or you can serve your idols. You can obey the Lord or you can obey your pseudo deities. You can choose the way that leads to life or the way that leads to death. Which will it be?

That's not just a question for the people in the pews. It's a question for the preacher as well. So Joshua leads by example. He declares that he and his household will devote themselves to the Lord. Note that Joshua speaks for everybody within the walls of his home, which probably includes not only his immediate family but his servants as well. His statement reflects the times in which it was spoken. This was a highly paternalistic and patriarchal culture where the father was the decision maker. That's why none of Joshua's kids come walking down the aisle saying, "Now hold on Dad! I'm my own person, capable of making my own decisions, especially when it comes to choosing a religion, or no religion at all." That's just not the way a household worked in Joshua's time.

After preaching such a rousing sermon, and pledging his own family's devotion to God, you would think that now's the time for Joshua to call forward the minister of music, who will

lead the hymn of invitation. But the people are in such a hurry to give their lives to the Lord that they've already started coming out of the pews and down to the altar. "Whoa, hold on there," says Joshua. "Get back in your seats. Don't rush forward without thinking carefully about what you're signing up for. This isn't about some religious formality, some casual verbal commitment and a certificate of membership in the congregation. No, this is about devoting your whole self to worshiping and serving a holy and jealous God who expects wholehearted, one hundred percent loyalty."

At first, it sounds like Joshua is trying to argue the people out of their desire to dedicate themselves to the Lord. It's as if he won't take "yes" for an answer. But in reality, he's just trying to make sure that they understand the truth about the God they intend to serve. They need to recognize the implications of their decision. Eventually, after a few more minutes of going back and forth with the congregation, Joshua is convinced that the people are actually ready to move forward. "Alright then, let's make all this official," says Joshua. He leads them in a covenant making ceremony, putting everything down in writing, and setting up a stone as a witness to everything God has said to them and the promises they have made to God.

So now the people have made their choice. They will serve the Lord. From here forward, everything is to be different. But we know that as the story unfolds, everything isn't as different as it should be. There will be many more times when the people will behave like they love other things more than God. They'll fail to serve him like they truly belong to him. They'll try to go back and retrieve those false gods that they supposedly threw away when they made their promises at Shechem. As the story of God and his people continues, there will need to be more sermons, more altar calls, and more opportunities for repentance and recommitment.

That's often the way it is when we say "yes" to God. We make promises, privately and publicly, pledging ourselves to the Lord, to his people, and to the work of his kingdom. We enter into covenant with the God who through Christ has delivered us and made us his own. But we regularly fail to live out the implications of that covenant, in our relationship with God and with others.

In the church where I grew up, there was a large framed copy of a document called "The Church Covenant" hanging on the wall just above the piano. It began: "Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ." From there, the covenant went on to spell out our mutual commitments and obligations on a range of topics: church, money, family, alcohol, prayer, gossip, and most of all, love for one another. Because of the covenant's size, it was hard to sit in the sanctuary of that little country church and not see it, unless you had gotten used to it, which is always a danger.

I came across an experience from one person whose church had built a new sanctuary and had converted the old one into a fellowship hall. But they didn't move the church covenant. Instead, they decided to leave the framed "sacred" covenant in its "sacred" spot on what was now the fellowship hall wall. When this particular gentleman asked his dad, who was a deacon in the church, about the covenant, his dad said he didn't recall any of the preachers ever talking about it. And one of the gentleman's sisters said, "So that's what that thing is."¹

It's easy to make commitments to Christ and his church, with the best intentions and the purest motives, and then over time neglect those commitments. Those promises can become like the oversized congregational covenant, hanging on the wall, receiving little attention while collecting plenty of dust. I suspect that over time, many among God's people took for granted that big stone set up there at Shechem. With time and neglect, it became less and less a vital sign of covenant and more and more just another part of the landscape, with some in future generations perhaps asking, "What is that?"

Remember that Joshua's call to commitment is part of the larger story of God's people learning how to inhabit the land that God has given them. They must learn how to live in this new land, with all its abundance, and all its dangers as well. One of the primary dangers is that the people will grow complacent and slip into loyalty to other gods and other ways of life, rather than sticking to a way of life centered on loving God and loving neighbor. This way of life characterized by practicing mercy and pursuing righteousness is always at risk, which means that crucial choices have to be made every day.

Preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "He who chooses the beginning of a road chooses the place it leads to. It is the means that determine the end." There are major decisions in life that can help set the course, and outcome, of your journey. At the top of the hierarchy of choices is the decision about whom or what you will serve. You may be able to look back on your life and recall those times and places where you gave your life to the Lord, or committed yourself to a particular kind of work for the kingdom, or devoted yourself to serving God in whatever ways he would lead you. That particular beginning of the road was crucial. But there are also those daily choices to be made about how you're going to implement your major commitments, most of all your loyalty to the Lord.

The covenant of marriage remains one of the best illustrations of this truth. It's one thing to stand in the presence of God and assembled witnesses and say, "I do." But it's another thing to work out and live out the implications of that promise in the changing currents of life. That's why, when I'm going through the process of premarital preparation with a future husband and wife, I stress that we're not just getting ready for a wedding. We're getting ready for marriage. Initial commitment has to be worked out in the challenges and complexities of daily covenantal choices.

One pastor tells about about traveling in Ghana, and learning that in the country's dominant language, the only way to ask, "What is your religion?" is to ask, "Whom do you serve?" So choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. There are those high points of decision-making that will shape the course of your life and the lives of others. But there also needs to be that daily deciding to stay the course of Christ. Every day is the day of commitment. Not only on Sunday, but on each day, you need to face the opportunities and struggles in front of you and say, "This day, I choose to serve the Lord. This day, I toss aside the false gods that I've embraced and loved. This day, I choose to follow the way of Jesus. This day, I choose to be on the path that leads to life. This day, I choose to love God and love my neighbor. This day, I choose to walk in holiness and righteousness."

You made a choice to be here in this worship gathering today. Your presence is a declaration of loyalty to God. As individuals and as a congregation, we need this weekly opportunity to restate our dedication to God, and to recommit our lives to him. That's how moving forward in Christ happens, by choosing, day in and day out, to worship and serve the Lord, and the Lord alone.

¹ <http://forums.baptistlife.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1773>. October 4, 2005. Accessed November 13, 2014.