

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 & my house, we will serve the Lord.

### **IF IT IS EVIL IN YOUR EYES**

The husband refused to learn how to operate a PC. His wife tried to get him to realize how important it was, since all their financial records were stored on the hard drive. “What if something happens to me?” she asked. “You wouldn’t know what our assets are.” To that the husband replied, “Honey, if something happened to you, I wouldn’t need any money.” **PAUSE**

If you found that humorous at all it’s because of the sarcasm in the husband’s answer. Sarcasm is a sharp & often ironic statement designed to cut, or to give pain. Because of that biting intent, it’s a tool to be used carefully when speaking. Sarcasm leaves more room for misunderstanding than other ‘gentler’ forms of speech.

As a result, some people are under the impression that sarcasm has no place in Christianity. They may even use a portion of the sermon text for today to make their point, “But as for me & my house, we will serve the Lord,” rather than use sarcasm, they may say. Such a misconception then puts a double twist in the words of Joshua.

That’s because, not only does Joshua have no intention of suggesting we have the ability to choose to serve the Lord, he’s also using sarcasm in this very text. You see, Joshua had just finished reciting all the Lord had done for His people over the past 700 years, from calling Abram to the land of Canaan, & rescuing from Egypt, to giving Israel the land of milk & honey.

Obviously it is good to serve the Lord. It’s sort of like saying, “Choose for yourselves today whether you will cash your paycheck or throw it in the fire.” Should you have to think about that one? Certainly not in today’s economy, but just 3 years ago, though our nation’s

financial system was built on a house of cards, people were so overconfident they were throwing money around, left & right, in that climate. Leading up to this 3<sup>rd</sup> & final farewell sermon of Joshua's, the people of Israel had been on a roll. By God's direction, everything was going their way. They'd defeated everyone in their path, & now possessed the land of Canaan.

The people of God had been hearing this promise for 700 years, & it finally came true. As Joshua described it, "The Lord gave rest to them from [enemies] all around, according to all that He swore to their fathers." Would these good times continue to roll? I expect that everyone in Israel thought so, except apparently Joshua.

Comparing this time in Israel's history, to our own in the United States, it's similar to the period right after WWII. Especially in an economic sense, our nation stood on top of the world. Every other economy was devastated or destroyed, & in spite of the Cold War the good times rolled, all the way through the 1960's.

Here at St. Matthew, during the early to mid 1980's, this congregation had gotten beyond the removal of their pastor from the Synod's roster, & yet continued to flourish. The new sanctuary was built. The school continued to grow. The mission work in India was taking off, & members were traveling all over the world teaching others how to share the Word of God.

We can compare this time in Israel's history to individual lives, as people graduate from high school or college, get hired for their 1<sup>st</sup> good job, buy their 1<sup>st</sup> home, marry a childhood sweetheart, receive the blessing of their 1<sup>st</sup> child, or finally have the chance to retire & live the 'good life.'

Whether our country, or this congregation, or with individual lives, there are mountaintop events, times when we are at the top of the world, that compare with the situation Israel was in as Joshua gathers them together at Shechem for his final sermon. Joshua wants his

people to consider where their future is headed, & he wants them to consider on which foundation that future is built. It is time for a serious & sober assembly of the people, because it's time, after all their recent good fortune, to remind them exactly who was responsible for those blessings. The people of Israel were ripe for a fall, & Joshua knew it.

But when an individual, a congregation, or a nation, is on a roll, they are often the last to see the dangers ahead. I deal with that frequently in counseling couples who are about to get married. "But pastor, we love each other. What could possibly go wrong?" Somehow, Joshua needed to get past that wall so he could warn his people of the risks which lie ahead.

Under those circumstances God inspired Joshua to use sarcasm in his attempt to cut through the blindness, & the feelings of invincibility, that so commonly follow on the heels of success. After the Japanese won the devastating victory of Pearl Harbor, they spent the rest of the war stumbling in the blindness caused by that initial triumph.

Our nation was on top of the world after WWII, & the blindness resulting from that allowed overconfidence to set in. After the boom years of the early to mid 80's, this church ended up a million dollars in debt & its pastor was overcome with cancer which led to his death. As individuals, each of us has faced the end of similar mountaintop seasons in our lives.

In the past, how have you done at considering where your personal future was headed? Upon which foundation were you building that future during those mountaintop times? Were you prepared for the dangers ahead? "...if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve...?"

Joshua's sarcastic expression is designed to horrify the hearers by presenting to them the option of worshipping other gods when the Lord has already destroyed the people who venerated those gods – the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Gergashites, the

Hivites, & the Jebusites. Every one of those peoples had been given into the hands of the Israelites. It was an absurd possibility to choose to serve one of their gods. The sarcasm achieves its effect as the response of the Israelites showed at the end of today's OT reading, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods..."

Sarcasm is defined as a sharp & often ironic statement designed to cut, or to give pain. Because of that biting intent, it can be useful to wake us from the slumber that Satan often lulls us in to. Right after the OT reading ends, Joshua warns the people that they will not serve Yahweh. That's just a fact.

Unholy as they were, even their best efforts would not satisfy the demands of a holy Lord. Faith would gradually leave the people in spite of their revulsion at Joshua's sarcastic suggestion. Don't you see faith in Jesus Christ as the answer to everything leaving the people of our nation? Every day people in the United States are choosing to serve other gods.

Joshua's sermon is a call for renewal because the people will forget. They'll be tempted to live for that which they feel they deserve. Daily we need to renew our side of the baptismal covenant, not for God's sake, but for our own, lest we, & because we, forget. Remembering that God called us in the waters of baptism is necessary for when we wander off.

We do not choose to serve God. He chooses us. We can only choose NOT to serve Him, & we will. That's what sin is, plain & simple. Jesus offers forgiveness, plain & simple. If we do put ourselves last, in order that others might be first, our Savior gets all the credit. We can only be saved & preserved by God's mercy & faithfulness.

The Bible was written, partly because His people continually forget how His grace has been there for them throughout thousands of years. The Word of God holds up in front of us the reality of God's side of the Covenant. God acts in history for His people. History is at His

command. Joshua's history is ours, so it is written down for us to remember & to trust & to believe in, especially when we're confronted with challenges, trials & struggles; especially when we are suffering. Yahweh is a spirit who is seen in what has been done in history.

That includes the sacrifice on the cross; the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost & God's merciful calling of His people into the covenant of grace & forgiveness through Holy Baptism. For each of our lives there's a long prologue – all of salvation history – to our individual baptism.

Then our individual baptism incorporates us in to that history of God's actions throughout the ages. Unbelievers do consider the revealed Lord, & faith in Him, to be evil. Just read of the comments of evolutionary atheists.

In effect, Joshua is asking, "Is that the way you see it, Israel, that serving the Lord is evil? If so, then consider the other gods & make your best selection." In other words, put your money where your mouth is.

In verse 15 Joshua has come to the heart of his official business. He declares that Israel must continue to meet God's covenant requirements if the solemn pact made at Mt. Sinai is to remain in force. The essential stipulation is this: "...fear the Lord & serve Him in sincerity & in faithfulness."

The problem is that the Israelites will not serve God in that way. Joshua himself tells them so, "You are not able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God... If you forsake the Lord & serve foreign gods, then He will turn & do you harm & consume you..." Those words also apply to us. That's why Jesus came to take our place.

It is not our deeds of service, but the Word of the Lord that has the power to keep us steadfast as believers in the one true faith unto life everlasting. We are weak in serving by God's

design, because we are not to be like the Canaanites who were primarily interested in outward & ritualistic actions. We are to lean our heart to, & upon, the Lord. Yahweh wants the affections of His people. If we lean on & trust in Him, the deeds of service will follow, but we cannot short circuit that path by skipping the leaning & trusting part. Shortcuts are a dead end.

Our saintly nature desires to get rid of all idols, whether they're attitudes of the heart, or tangible objects. Our sinful nature does not want to rid ourselves of them but to indulge in them. The fear of the Lord is faith that flees to Him to be washed clean of sin. Unbelief is what causes us to try fleeing from God in terror & hopelessness.

The essence of the Christian faith is not the things we are to accomplish, or the things we should avoid, but first & foremost to repent of our sins, & then to believe that our sins are forgiven. That message will bring life to those who grasp it, & through that life flows the subsequent accomplishing of things to do, & of things to avoid.

If you've not been considering where your future is headed, or the foundation on which that future is built, then Jesus had good reason to die for your sins that you might receive life everlasting as a gift, free & clear, no strings attached. Resurrection from the dead awaits us, & until then we serve the Lord through repenting of our sins, & believing they are forgiven.

That is how the life of God's Spirit dwells within us, & flows through us, so that serving our Lord will not appear evil in our eyes. Amen.

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Amen. Ephesians 5:6-8a ESV