

January 4, 1998

THE CHALLENGE OF CHOICE

In the service of commitment Joshua challenged the people to make a fresh commitment to God. He then paused and provided the people an opportunity to vocally make that commitment, and then he turned with a final word of challenge. I am sure that I have never preached this way, but I have never done Joshua 24 either. So we are going to hear part of the sermon; then we are going to ask you to make a challenge. The words come directly out of Scripture. After that I will come for a brief challenge.

In Joshua, Chapter 24, Verse 14, it says, “*Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve. Whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the river or the god of the Ammorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my house, we are going to serve the Lord.*”

Students of American culture say *Americans have altered their concept of long-term commitments*. Part of that has been forced on us and part of it has been because our attitudes change. You see it in all areas of life. For example, *you see it in the workplace*. Years ago, a person would work for the same company in the same job for most of his lifetime. We are told that today a person entering the workplace will have twelve different jobs. Part of that is due to different options and part of it is due to companies reorganizing, but whatever the reason the old static way of work has forever changed.

We see it in the marketplace, in the consumerism of America. For years big companies built their name brand products, and when you went to the store you looked for those products. Today what you hear more than any other is the word “generic.” Stores have recognized that you are going to buy the cheapest thing and not necessarily the name that you have always

bought. And big companies today are having to reinvent the loyalty that people have had to them.

You see it in politics. I was talking with a man recently and he said, “My Mother voted Democratic because her Father voted Democratic and I will vote Democratic until I die.” But he is an unusual one. The political landscape is changing; already whole areas of the country who used to vote one way are now voting another, and politicians are finding that people will actually change loyalties from one election to the next.

We find it in sports. Big name stars now go from team to team, whoever can offer them the most money. And coaches change dependent upon a winning season. Somebody facetiously said that coaches now have their names written in chalk on contracts and athletic directors sit with an eraser, throwing it up and down after each game. It is the recognition that nothing is really settled anymore.

We see it in families. The age of young people marrying today continues to get older and older as young people do not want to make commitments as early as they did in the past, and many times after they have made a commitment they find it not unusual to break that commitment and live with someone else.

Americans don't make New Year's resolutions anymore. And the reason for not doing so, someone said, is that the word *resolution* is based upon the word *resolute*, and we are not resolute about anything. We don't feel deeply enough about anything to say, “I'm going to do this,” or “This is going to affect my life,” or “I am going to make a change” - we simply are not going to do it. I did hear about a man this week who said he was going to quit smoking in 1998. He said it was the easiest thing he had ever done--he had quit a hundred times before--quitting smoking is very easy. And *most of us who will make commitments soon break them*; we are just not willing to make long-term commitments in our lives.

Volunteer organizations have found this true. It used to be that a call would go out: will you come and take a job for a year? And what we have found is that people are unwilling to do that anymore, and we almost have to find two people to take the same job; and many

people are not willing to do it for a year, but for a short period of time. And we've even found in our own church that if our studies go longer than 8 or 10 weeks the attendance is going to nose-dive. People are simply not willing to make long-term commitments.

But when you begin to read through the Bible you understand that from the very beginning *the lack of long-term commitments is something that has plagued us in our relationship to God*. When you open the scripture, it talks about the one God; it talks about the God who is above everything. It talks about the God before Whom everything else pales into insignificance. It talks about the one God Who is more worthy to be praised. It talks about the God who is above everything. And the first commandment says, “*You are not to have any other gods beside me. I alone am worthy of all of your praise and all of your adoration, and if you are ever going to follow me it's going to mean you are going to have to give yourself totally unto me.*” But as you begin to read through the Bible what you find is that people began to reach for this idol and that idol. They begin to have dual loyalties. They began to have multiple allegiances. And people never could get to the point where they would literally give themselves totally to God. So when Joshua comes to his people he says, “*Now what do you need to understand? It's that if you are going to be the people of God then you must be totally surrendered to God in your life. There is no such thing as worshipping God on one day and doing what you want the rest. There's no such thing as going through rituals and in the back of your mind having other allegiances. If you are ever going to know what it means to serve Him it's going to demand that you give your life totally unto Him.*”

The sickness that all of us have is in our spirit. The sickness that we have is that we never can really make up our minds. If I ask you today if you are a Christian, most of us would say “Yes”, but if I ask if you are totally given unto Him, you would say “Sometimes”. And all of us recognize that while we are sitting in a church this morning we have all kinds of idols in our hearts that demand our allegiances; and we have never come to the point where we have said, “Lord, I want to give myself to you”. And yet you understand that when Jesus came that's what He reminded us of and that's what He demanded in His life. You will recall the truth

about Jesus: He was always so accepting of people, but the people He was the hardest on were religious people. And the term He used was the word “hypocrite.” And in some of the frankest--and almost brutal--ways in which He talked to religious people He said, “*You come and you sit, but on the inside there are all kinds of idols in your heart. You are hypocrites; depart from me. I cannot endure mixed allegiances.*” On one occasion He talked about the human eye, saying that *your eye brings light into your body; if your eye is focused it brings the light. “But,”* He said, “*if your eye is unfocused it will bring darkness. A person who has his eye centered on God, has his priorities straight, his allegiances made, who has said, ‘I want to be what God wants me to be,’ has his mind made up. That is going to bring light. But if you try to look at life through all kinds of priorities and value systems what you are going to do is stumble around in the darkness. You simply cannot live by serving two gods.* And so Jesus continued to try to help us make up our minds who we are going to serve.

Most of the people in this room indicated that when you were baptized. Some of you did it at confirmation, but most of you did it at baptism. Let me remind you what baptism signifies. What you did is say to the Lord, “I want to make you Lord of my life.” You came in a public ceremony and you stood in water. And you said, “This is my life before I gave myself to Christ. Now I want to die to my old self.” You literally drew the picture of death, of being buried. And you said, “I want to put that old life behind me, and I want to be raised to walk in newness of life.” I mean, baptism is not that you got sick, baptism is that you died. And you said, “I want to put my past behind me. I want to start a new way. I want to give my allegiance to Christ.” That's what you meant when you were baptized. Well, then let me give you the statistics. Ten people join a church. After one year--twelve months later--three of them can't be found. After five years, only three *can* be found. Five years, ten people--I want to give my *life* to Christ--and after five years only three of them can be found. We are not willing to give ourselves totally unto Him.

Someone helped me recently by defining what's involved in making a commitment, and this is what he told me. You have to *think truthfully*. You have to *feel deeply*. Some things have to matter to you. You have to *act boldly*. And you have to *hold on tenaciously*.

You have got to stick with it. In our commitment to Christ we continually say, “Lord, I make it and I live for you.”

Many men in this room are familiar with a name, “Promise Keepers”. The man who has become the spokesman for Promise Keepers is a former football coach at Colorado. His name is Bill McCartney. He recently published his autobiography. It is not a very pretty story. He is brutally frank about the mistakes made during the first part of his life. One day somebody had asked him to do something. He made up a good excuse; it sounded good and he thought he had gotten by with it. He went home and sat down and God said to him, “Well, I see you think you’ve made it again.” He said, “Bill, don’t you understand? That’s not what I want. I don’t want you to act good. I want you to be good.” And he said the word that came to him was the word *radical obedience*. “*I want you to be radically obedient to me.*” And that’s the reason that the title of his book is *Sold Out*. He said, “I used to tell football players, ‘If you are going to be a winner, if you are going to be a champion, if you are going to learn to enjoy and play this game, you are going to have to have discipline and you are going to have to have commitment and you are going to have to work at it. And if you don’t you are going to get hurt. And you are going to be so out of shape that you are not going to enjoy it.’” And he said, “I began to understand that’s what God wanted. God wanted commitment and discipline, and otherwise I’m going to get myself hurt. And I’m going to hurt the cause of Christ if I’m not sold out to Him” Someone said that nothing is more awesome than a person sold out to God. And then someone said that nothing is more awful than a person who keeps selling out to the world.

Why does God demand our allegiance? He demands it because that is the only way we will ever experience His joy and His fulfillment. Do you understand that He called you to commitment because God has a plan and a purpose for your life. God can use all kinds of instruments, but God can’t use half-hearted people and God can’t use dirty instruments. He has things that He wants to do through you and with you. But He asks that you make up your mind. Last night I heard an old gospel song I hadn’t heard for years. It said, “I have anchored my soul in the haven of rest, I will sail the wild seas no more.” And if you are ever

going to follow God you are going to have to anchor your soul in the haven of rest. You are going to have to put Him first. You are going to have to make the commitment that is necessary to Him.

After Joshua challenged them, he then said, “Now I want you to respond.” We’ve taken the words right out of Scripture. In a few moments, we are going to ask you to make that commitment. After Joshua had given the people a chance to make a commitment he came with his final charge. It begins in verse 19. “*Joshua said to the people, you are not able to serve God. He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellions and your sins if you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods. He will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you after He has been good to you. But the people said to Joshua, No, we will serve the Lord. Then Joshua said, you are a witness against yourself that you have chosen to serve the Lord. Yes, we are witnesses, they replied. Now then, said Joshua, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord the God of Israel.*”

Joshua wanted to remind all of them that commitments to God must never be cheap. They can never be entered into lightly because of who He is. He said about Him that He is the holy God, which means that He is absolutely without any concept of wrong at all. The Bible says about Him that He is so righteous that He cannot even be tempted to do what is wrong; and people through the Bible, as they came to be in his presence, were aware that here is *the God, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty*. He is the God of absolute righteousness. And I can’t come into His presence and play games with Him. Joshua said about Him that He was the jealous God. We usually use the word *jealous* negatively, but it’s always a very positive word in the Bible. The word *jealous* means that you care about somebody and you care about them enough that you want them for yourself. I am jealous for my wife. Wouldn’t it be strange if I weren’t? Wouldn’t it be strange if I’d say, “I don’t care what you do. I don’t care where you go. If you want to live with me Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday that’s fine, you can live with who you want to Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. I don’t care enough about you to care what you do.” But I care enough about her that I want her for myself; and I care enough that I want the very best for her.

I am jealous about a lot of things. I am jealous for this church. There are a lot of things I care about very deeply; and God says, “*I am the jealous God. You can’t have all kinds of spiritual lovers and think I am going to be satisfied. I demand that you give me your allegiance.*” And so He turned to them and He said, “*This is what I want you to do. I want you to take away all your false gods.*” So you can see them going back to their tents; and here is a god that they bowed down to or here is one they held onto, and He says, “*I want you to take all of them and I want you to throw them away and I want you to serve God.*”

So what I want to do now is to let you take an inventory. You are not going to go home and throw anything away, but I want you to throw away some things now. Ask yourself what is hindering your public witness for Christ. You say, “I don’t know what that is.” Then ask the person who is the closest to you and the frankest with you to name the one thing that is hindering your witness in the world. Then, when you become familiar with it are you willing to say, “Dear God I will not hold onto anything that will hinder my testimony to the world,”? Take the inventory of your private disciplines. When you are alone with God and nobody else knows it but you and God, what is it that’s keeping you from an open, warm personal deep relationship with God? Something that’s hidden. Something that nobody knows about, but secretly you hold onto and that you want more than anything else, and when you are all alone that’s the thing that you desire. Are you willing to throw it away?

Look at the horizontal things of your life. Who have you hurt? Who have you harmed? With whom do you need to make it right? Then take that and throw it away.

Look at the vertical experiences of your life. What is it in your life that somehow or another you know is not right with you and God? Take it and throw it away.

Look at your life before you came to Christ and look at your life after you came to Christ. Have you given God those things that were yours before you came to Christ and let Him transform them and use them for

His glory? For example, yesterday when I walked into the building there was a man here who openly indicates that he is a alcoholic. But he *was* an alcoholic and then he gave his life to Christ, and now God has transformed that and is using his alcoholism to help other men who are alcoholics. You see, he has given what he had before God became supreme in his life, but he let God transform him and use it to His glory. Some of you made money before you came to Christ, but you used that money for yourself. Let Christ transform you and let Christ use that money for His glory.

What is it that you haven’t let God transform? Any part of your life not transformed is a part of your idol, and you need to surrender it to Him. What is it in your life that you are aware you need to throw away? You need to make a deep commitment of your life. It is going to take more than just standing in a church and saying, “I confess, I am going to serve you.” It is radical obedience to Him. Now listen to what He says. The choice is up to you. You can make whatever choice you want, but He said, “*I’ll tell you one thing I won’t give you. I won’t give you the right to determine the consequences. I determine that. If you do not serve me, then I will judge you. That choice is not left up to you.*” If you walk out of here today still holding onto your old ways, still thinking you can play games with God, then you will have to suffer the consequences that He has put in place. But if you want a life of fullness, a life of joy, a life of purpose, a life of meaning, then He says, “*Give your life to me.*” Put everything else aside and make a determination you are going to serve Him. God has a plan and a purpose for you. God wants to use you. All that He asks is to give yourself to Him. What a wonderful day, the first Sunday of a new year, to say, “I want to give my life to Christ,” and to dedicate yourself afresh to God.