

December 9, 2018

Lesson 2: Choose to Love and Serve God

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24

Context:

As our series continues on loving God we move from the laws for loving God set up in Deuteronomy and Numbers to the stories of the Israelites and how they came to practice the law of love. Following the wandering in the wilderness and Moses dying before they entered the Promised Land, the people are given Joshua as their new leader, their judge to help guide and direct them. Joshua will be the one who begins the unification of the tribes and also helps them assimilate into their region with the others around them.

With the mixing of their tribes and the coming into the land, there is the question of how they will live with each other. In this last book of Joshua we get a glimpse into how they are taking those laws given by Moses and putting them into practice. Scholars have commented that this chapter in Joshua resembles certain ancient Near Eastern treaties, particularly the pacts of the powerful Hittite empire made with its weaker neighbors in which there was a vassal system with the weaker pledging loyalty to the stronger party.¹ In this case, we have God making a compact with Israel, the helpless vassal. While God does not have a list of demands that are given, the people make a list of how they will commit themselves to the Lord.

Joshua gathers the elders of all Israel and they come together to worship. As they do, they remember their history. Their forefather Abraham grew up in a world where other gods were served, yet God chose Abraham to belong to God. A covenant was made and God led Abraham home. God also saved the Israelites by rescuing them from Egypt and took them into a land that belonged to others. They are in a home that they did not build and they are enjoying crops they did not plant. All of this came not because of the gods of the Euphrates area or of Egypt, but because of God who claims and loves Israel. It is now up to the people as to how they will respond to that love and commitment that has been shown to them. The people choose to follow the God of Israel and mark themselves as witnesses in an intimate partnership.

An interesting note in this passage is how many times there is the imperative to “fear the Lord” (NRSV translate to revere) and “serve the Lord.” There have been some to take this translation as thinking of God as some wrathful deity watching to see how we cross the line or make a mistake. However the actual term is to evoke a reverence of God that leads to devotion and obedience.² It is a purging of the heart and a desire to approach God as a serious subject with the dedication to serving a monarch who is benevolent and constantly seeking the protection and prosperity of their people. The same goes for the “serve the Lord.” The translation of that word has the same root of the word “slave,” speaking of the absolute devotion to one master.³ Instead of the physical form of slavery,

¹ Jerome F.D. Creach, “Joshua,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 2003), 121.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

this servant hood is to lead to a full realization of life and blessing.

Application

When I've seen this passage used in today's world, I have often been disappointed how people apply it, particularly Joshua 24: 15. It is used as a way to say that there is only way to serve the Lord with this nice neat little box and it misses the point that God does not fit into our boxes. In fact, following the Lord will often take us to places that make us uncomfortable and being around people who make us uncomfortable. To say that we will choose to follow and serve God should not only be humbling, it should keep us on our toes so that even our self-righteousness comes into question constantly.

When the Israelites found themselves in the Promised Land, there were more challenges than they anticipated. Everywhere there were idols set up and there was a god for everything. As the people assimilated into the local areas, they picked up some of their habits. Some might have been for the good, but some were not. They started to worship gods that at first were innocuous in appearance, but pretty soon they had forgotten the God who had given them life.

We do the same especially in the western world. Because the god of Mammon has been a staple of the American way of life, we too have begun to serve other gods. We may not even notice at first because we are so caught up in following those around us that we become blind to a different way of being. Yet the effects are everywhere.

Take for example how our love for money at first is used to justify living a good life. Yet it leads to other things. We can create worlds where we don't have to worry about anything and our children don't have to worry about anything either. We become so obsessed with our status that we miss out on relationships and experiences where we can dive deep with others. We prevent our children from learning from failure or learning how to live with others who are different from them. Our cliques make it pretty clear to people about what is normalized behavior and what is not. We end up serving gods that isolate us from God and others: gods of exclusivity, status, and "normalcy." We miss the God of Israel who redeems all people and calls for all people to live intermixed and doing life together.

Who do you serve? Do you serve the God of Israel who comes for all people or do you serve the gods of a different sort? How do you serve our Lord by serving and advocating for others? Is your God one that only serves the needs of the comfortable, or does your God serve those who are oppressed and alienated for varying factors? Choose today the Lord you will serve and may it be the God of Israel who comes to set all people free and claims all as part of the Kingdom of God.

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