

Pathways to Preaching

a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary

Choosing to Serve the Lord

Text: Joshua 24:[1-13]14-25 New International Version (NIV)

14 “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve

the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! 17 It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18 And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.”

19 Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. 20 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.”

21 But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the Lord.”

22 Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.



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Text continued

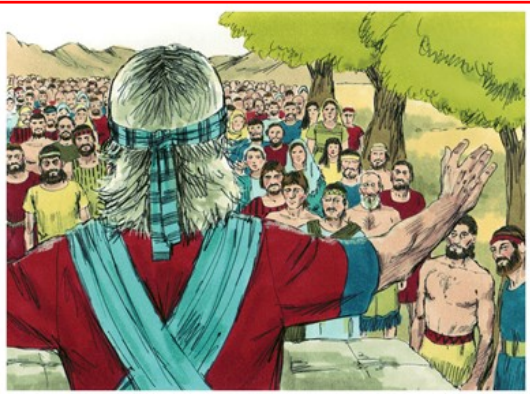
23 “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.”

25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.

Synopsis:

Joshua has led the people of Israel into settling in the Promised Land. The saga of escaping slavery, wandering the wilderness, entering the Promised Land, and settling into the land is reaching its conclusion. This text is listed above as “[1-13,] 14-25” because, while the whole text may not be read in worship due to its length, a preacher must be aware of the full text and



preach on the whole section.

In the first section, Joshua gathers the people and reminds them of what God has done for them. He recounts the story of God leading Abraham into the land and giving it to him, and then Jacob going to Egypt. Joshua continues with God leading the people of Israel from slavery into freedom; then from the wilderness into the Promised Land. Having told this story, Joshua asks them to choose whether they will serve God in return, and they commit themselves to doing so. Yet Joshua rejects their initial pledge to serve God. Only after they repeat it does Joshua draw up a covenant, outlining the commitments that come with serving the Lord.

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Law in the Text:

Joshua 24:14-15 is a familiar text, and one upon which I frequently hear sermons based. In it, Joshua lays out before the people of Israel a choice. They are to choose whether or not they will serve the Lord. He himself makes the decision for his family that they would be faithful to the God who led them out from Egypt. These verses, taken on their own, can certainly be heard as law. It can be heard as,

"We today must make a decision for whether we are with Christ or not."

However, I do not think that it is in this call for a decision that we find the law most clearly in this passage. Rather, it is important to read the whole passage to see how these verses function.

The chapter begins with Joshua gathering the people. He then recounts the tales of the way that God has chosen them and led them. While it may not be feasible to read Joshua's telling of what God has done (verses 1-13) in worship because of the length of the reading, it is essential to speak about them in the sermon in order to interpret the passage that starts at verse 14. Only after telling about what God has done does Joshua ask them to choose. When they proclaim that they choose to serve the Lord, he chides them that no person can do it. Still, they insist that they will serve the Lord. Thus he writes up the covenant outlining what it means to serve the Lord.

The law in this text is found, I contend, in Joshua's rejection of the people's affirmation of their service. He tells them they it is impossible to serve the Lord. Biblical scholar Trent C. Butler points out that the reasons the people give for pledging to serve God differ from the story of what God has done that Joshua had just told. Joshua had emphasized Yaweh's victories against those who opposed Israel, but the people cite the signs and wonders that Yaweh had done.

Butler suggests that Joshua saw in this difference that the people did not understand what serving God truly meant. They thought that Yahweh was like the other gods that other peoples worshipped. These gods did not make the same kind of exclusive claim that Yahweh does. In return for performing signs and wonders of protection, the religions of these other gods asked people to serve them through building images, houses, and performing sacrifices. It was a trade: do these rituals and in return the god would protect you in time of need through miraculous action. While perhaps in theory these religions required exclusive devotion, in practice it was not hard for common worshippers to fulfill these requirements for several different religions.



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Law in the Text: (Continued from page 3)

A helpful image here may be that of a bank account. We put money into a bank account so that when we need money we can go to the ATM and withdraw it. While banks may want our exclusive business, there is nothing to prevent us from opening bank accounts with several different banks. We have a transactional relationship with a bank, and many people today view the relationship with God in these terms. We act in service of God so that when we need it God will come to our aid.

Joshua is telling the people that the Lord requires more than this. Service to God is based on God's very nature, not on what God does through miraculous action. God is by nature jealous and zealous. That is, God's nature is one of profound love for the people of Israel. This love means that God is totally devoted to the people of Israel. God's protection is not about signs and wonders in response to the people's minor acts of service. Rather, God is fully committed to the people and so protects them out of love for them.



In return for this gracious love, God calls for a response of love from the people. Service to God, then, is not just about performing rituals, but is about whole-hearted commitment to living in the holy and loving way that God desires. This is a considerably higher standard of service and devotion. It is so demanding to fully love God that Joshua insists that the people cannot achieve it. True service to God is beyond human capacity. Too easily humanity is tempted to take the easier path of performing a few basic rituals of devotion and then continuing to do what they want to do. This is what is meant by the temptation to serve strange, foreign gods. (Joshua 24:23) The Lord, however, demands total commitment. Against this demand, Joshua recognizes that the people will fail.



In other words, the demand that we find in this passage is to love God with our whole hearts. We are called to do this not because God does things for us, but because God is our Lord and worthy of praise and service. Joshua tells us this is impossible. We respond with self-interest in praising and serving God because we see that doing so helps us.

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Gospel in the Text:

Even though the people may not be able to fulfill God's call to total commitment, God remains faithful. God does not back away from the commitment that God has made to the people. The people of Israel are God's chosen people, and they will remain so despite their inability to appropriately love God in response. God has still led them thus far, from slavery through the return to the land God has given them. God will continue to lead them.

Having heard Joshua's rebuke, the people give a more concise and somber second response. Yet this response remains positive: they pledge to serve the Lord. In response to the commitment and love that God has shown them, they will respond with love for God. This time, however, the pledge is not simply to serve, but it is to listen obediently to God's voice. That is, in Joshua

24:23, Joshua tells them to incline their hearts to God, and in Joshua 24:24 they respond that they will serve and obey. The obedience is new to their pledge. It presumes that God will not only show up in time of need to protect through incredible acts of wonder and power, but will consistently guide and speak to the people. This is a gracious act of relationship that God extends to the people. God remains faithful to them despite the limitations of their devotion. In fact, this kind of continual relationship is precisely what constitutes true service to God. Service to the Lord is not about performing rituals, but rather in listening for God's voice and responding to it. Service to God is about a continuing relationship based in God's grace and responded to in love. This relationship is the basis of the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, it is a gracious relationship later understood by Christians to be clarified in Christ. Thus the relationship becomes the basis for Christian life.



RELATIONSHIP
with
GOD

Transformation in the Text:

The people come to have a new understanding of the meaning of God's relationship with them. At the beginning, they thought that God was like all of the other gods that the people around them followed. The interaction with any god was understood to be transactional. They were to perform rituals for the god, and in return the God would do miracles to protect them. Now they have come to understand that the Lord does not work in this manner. The Lord desires a continuing relationship, based on God's holiness and faithfulness. God wants true devotion through love and obedience.

Now that the people have begun to recognize what serving the Lord entails, and have pledged themselves to it, Joshua draws up a covenant.

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Transformation in the Text: (Continued from page 5)

Joshua writes in the book of law and sets a stone as a reminder of the relationship with God to which the people have committed themselves. It is a reminder that God not only has acted in the past, but God continues to act and to speak. The relationship continues. Through this covenant, the people are empowered to remain connected to God, listening for the Lord's continued speaking. Because they continue to be God's people, they will continue to be called to live as disciples of God's teaching. This is the continuing and transforming work of God within the community.

Theological Reflection:

Too often this text is heard as a testimony to the importance of the human decision to follow God. While that is indeed an element of this passage, it is not the primary theme of the text. The overriding theme is about God's faithfulness. God initiates the relationship through choosing Israel and continuing to guide the people of Israel. God commits to continuing the relationship; to continue to speak to the people, to guide them, and to remain faithfully their God. The human decision is in the response to this faithfulness. Yet even in this, the people do not fully understand what it means to respond in faith.

The same is true for us, I dare say. God has chosen us and continues to guide us, whether we notice it or not. We can respond to God's work in our lives. However, all too often we are misguided in our response. Like the people responding to the signs and wonders that God has done, we respond to God's actions rather than loving God for who God is. Also like the people in the text, we too easily fall into thinking that we can serve God and yet also commit to many other things.

We fail to see that a commitment to God must always come first. From this commitment, we can then appropriately serve in other areas of life in God's name.

Like the people in the text, we are prone to be swayed to take the easy way out in our religious life. We think: "I have gone to worship, I have said my prayers, now I am free to do what I want to do." We turn a relationship with God into a set of tasks or responsibilities that need to be done. We treat God like a bank.

Thus we can hear Joshua's admonition as being spoken to us today as well. He is challenging us to seek a deeper, more loving relationship. We should see all that we do as a continuing conversation with God.

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Theological Reflection: (Continued from page 6)

God has chosen us and continually speaks in our lives. In return we are called to listen and follow in love. Yet we fail at this seemingly simple task. We try to find easy ways out from this relationship, or we try to use God for our own advantage rather than serving God. Even so, God continues in relationship with us, calling us to follow.

What theologians say:

“[T]he faithful servant-ministry to which you are called, of morning-by-morning reading and listening, and week-by-week or month-by-month teaching and consoling – this ministry lies at the very heart of the life of the whole worldwide people of God. Without this, the game is over, and the idols and the empires have won. With this, even though it may seem that we sometimes walk in darkness, we may trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon our God, that his fresh, healing and creative word will do its work, and that the true power and glory which we see in Jesus will be established on earth as in heaven.” – NT Wright, “The Ear of the Servant, the Tongue of the Teacher.” <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/the-ear-of-the-servant-the-tongue-of-the-teacher/>

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Trent C. Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 7: Joshua*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983.)

Hymns: (www.lutheran-hymnal.com)

- 1. “Come follow me”, said Christ the Lord. #379**
- 2. God of grace and God of glory. #398**
- 3. Son of God, Eternal Savior. # 394**

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Becoming a Neighbor

Becoming a Neighbor

Text: Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷ He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

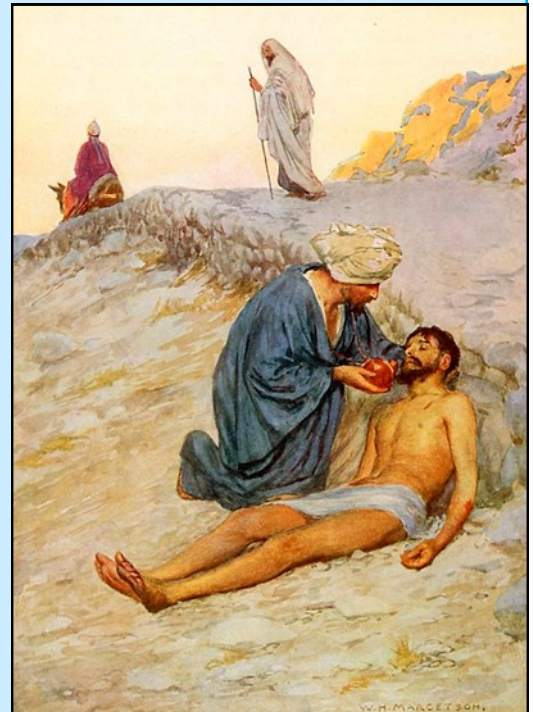
²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."



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Synopsis:

The parable of the Samaritan is one of the most famous of Jesus' parables. Jesus tells the parable of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man is attacked and robbed by bandits and left on the roadside. A priest and a Levite each walk by, not offering assistance. However, a Samaritan passes by and comes to the man's aide, taking him to an inn and making sure that he received the needed care. Jesus ends the parable with the question, "Who was a neighbor to this man?" Receiving the answer that it was the Samaritan, Jesus admonishes, "Go and do likewise."

Law in the Text:

It is important to keep the framing of this parable when seeking to understand it. Jesus is not simply telling about how it is important to help other people. Rather, he tells this story in response to his conversation with an expert in the law. The expert asks Jesus what must be done in order to be saved and inherit eternal life. In response, Jesus says, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (Luke 10:26). The lawyer responds by reciting the command that we are to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind; and in addition to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus affirms this answer and says that if he does this then he will live. Thus Jesus gives a clear picture of God's demand of us: we are to love God fully and love our neighbors deeply as well. This is what God wants and expects of us. It is what God demands of us in order for us to receive eternal life, and Jesus affirms that if we do these things we shall live. The expert, however, is not completely satisfied by this answer. He wants a more precise definition of who counts as a neighbor. Thus Jesus tells this parable to answer the question of who counts as a neighbor, but also the question of what is required in order to inherit eternal life.

Considering the expert's question about who counts as a neighbor, we can understand his intention to be that he is asking what limitations can be put around the command to have compassion for others. Who, exactly, must we love in order to fulfill the law to love our neighbor? In this sense we can see Jesus' parable to be telling us that we are commanded to love all others. Jesus gives a refutation of the lawyer's attempt to limit the radical command that God gives us to love other people.

The man going down the road to Jericho is completely unidentifiable. We are told that he is beaten and stripped. This indicates that the things that might identify him ethnically - his face and his clothing - have been removed. There is no way to know if he is Jewish, Samaritan, or from some other ethnic identity. The priest and the Levite, then, avoid this man because he might not be Jewish. Their understanding of being a neighbor is that it extends only to others of the same religious and ethnic group. More than that, though, they understand the risk of helping someone outside of their group to be a greater danger than the risk of not helping someone who is from their group.

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Becoming a Neighbor

Law in the Text: (Continued from page 9)

They are more concerned with differences than they are with compassion, and so they err on the side of caution rather than on the side of love. The Samaritan, however, decides it is better to help the wrong person than to fail to help someone for whom he should show care. Thus this is not strictly a parable of unconditional love, but rather of the boldness of love. Rather than fearfully refusing to take a risk of making a mistake in helping someone we should not, an attitude of compassion is one that risks mistakes in order to care for someone in need.

Jesus' answer to the expert, then, is that in order to inherit eternal life we must not put limits on love. God calls us to love all others, to care for their needs, and risk ourselves in order to protect them when they are vulnerable. In order to be saved we must love God and love all other people. This is an incredibly challenging demand. Every stranger is to be considered a neighbor that we are required to love, no matter whether they would care for us or not, no matter whether they are moral people or not, no matter what race or religion they claim. Jesus



is telling us that we must live with this expansive kind of love in order to be worthy of inheriting eternal life. How can anyone possibly live up to a life that shows so much love? It is natural to us to care more for those closest to us, whether they are our friends, family, or have other connections to us. We do not easily cross the boundaries of nation, race, religion, economic status, or other such divisions. Such an intensity of love seems impossible for us. Yet Jesus commands, "Go and do likewise." We are thus commanded to do the impossible if we want to inherit eternal life.

Gospel in the Text:

While it is not humanly possible to have unconditional love for all, Jesus lives with such love. Luke subtly hints at Jesus' fulfillment of his own command. New Testament scholar Lauri Thuren notes that in the Greek, the grammatical form of talking about Jesus' compassion in Luke 7:13, when he has compassion on the mother of a young man who has died and so raises the man back to life, is the same one used to describe the Samaritan's compassion in Luke 10:33. This same construction is also used in Luke 15:20 to describe the father who sees his long lost son returning. In all three instances, this compassion restores what had been lost: life, health, and a position within the family. Thuren suggests this indicates a connection between Jesus and the figures in these parables. Unconditional compassion brings new life, and Jesus is filled with this compassion.

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Becoming a Neighbor

Gospel in the Text: (Continued from page 10)

Thus while it is impossible for us to have the kind of compassion and unconditional love that makes us worthy of eternal life, Jesus' compassion gives new life. Jesus' love for us restores us and gives us eternal life even though we have not earned it. Jesus' love does for us what we are unable to do. This is the power of Christ's unconditional love.

The parable itself does not mention God or God's love. Jesus' earthly form of love, too, is only indirectly hinted at. Yet the implication is there that the unconditional love that Jesus speaks of is the kind of love that characterizes God.

Transformation in the Text:

Jesus does not talk about God directly in this parable; it is purely a story of a secular social interaction between people. The implication, then, is that even more so for those who claim to be God's people there is a demand to be compassionate towards all others, even strangers. In this sense, Jesus is not urging the lawyer (and by implication, us as well) to be like the Samaritan. Jesus is urging us to be even more loving. The priest and the Levite failed to help someone because they might not be a neighbor. The Samaritan helps because the person might be a neighbor. But in doing so, the Samaritan became a neighbor himself. Notice the shift from the initial discussion with the lawyer about loving one's neighbor to the final question Jesus asks.



Jesus' question is who was a neighbor. In the compassion for the other person, the Samaritan became a neighbor to that man. He might not have initially seen himself in that way, but compassion transformed him. Even more so, the people of God are called to be already transformed by this kind of compassion so that they are already neighbors to whoever they might meet. As such, they are moved to loving them, even beyond the socially acceptable lines of division.

What, then, of the command to love God fully and our neighbor as ourselves? It is impossible for us to achieve but is characteristic of God. Yet does that mean that we are relieved from the duty to love? The text of this parable alone does not address this issue. Yet the framing story of Jesus' discussion with the lawyer ends with the command, "Go and do likewise." Thus it would seem that this law is still in effect. Here we must think theologically about the text.

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Becoming a Neighbor

Transformation in the Text: (Continued from page 11)

If

unconditional compassion is essential to eternal life
and Jesus' unconditional compassion brings us new life,

Then

the new life that Jesus gives us with his compassion is a life of compassion
for others,
therefore bringing us into new life.

In other words, the command still holds over us. We are commanded to love. Yet we are enabled to love through receiving the love that comes from Christ. When we receive Christ's love, it changes who we are. As we have seen, it brings new life, new health and vitality, and restores relationships that have been broken. When we receive this new life in Christ, we are animated by that love. It moves us to love others. Thus we use the love we have received in Christ to love others. In doing so we live a life of compassion that follows the command of Christ. This is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, transforming us into being people of compassion for our neighbors. Indeed divine compassion transforms us into true neighbors to others, full of compassion for them.

Theological Reflection

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not simply a story urging us to do good deeds for one another. Rather, a key issue is the question of our attitude in responding to God's law. The priest and the Levite were afraid that they might break God's commands by helping this person. Their fear of God's demand for perfection caused them to fail to respond to a need. Their fear suffocated their compassion. They were correct in their concern to please God and follow God's commands. However, instead of leading them to compassion, that concern led them to inaction. Thus they missed the loving intention of God's law. The Samaritan understood that the need to care for others was more important than the letter of the law. In other words, we can see the priest and Levite as having understood the intellectual theology but missing the heart of God's love, while the Samaritan can be seen as someone who understands the heart but would have been seen as off base theologically.



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Theological Reflection: (Continued from page 12)

Jesus has already affirmed that the lawyer has a right understanding. Yet his questions about the definition of a neighbor indicate that his heart needed to be transformed towards greater love. Thus Jesus' command to him is to live God's commands in heart and action and not simply through his intellect. Rather than defining borders for God's love, the lawyer needed to live a loving life. In this, Jesus' command is not simply a law given. Rather, he is specifically leading this lawyer to what he personally needs in order to transform his life into the fullness of life led by the Holy Spirit.

The transforming power of Christ in our lives is one of removing perceived borders to God's love. As we receive the life-giving renewal of the Holy Spirit, our sense of who is a neighbor expands. We become the good neighbor to all that we meet. This entails loving God with our whole selves, but also our neighbors across boundaries of race, religion, nationality, and other dividing factors. This is the new life that we receive in Christ: a life of love.

What Theologians Say:

"Therefore [a Christian] should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor." – Martin Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*

Bibliography:

Lauri Thuren, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

Hymns: (www.lutheran-hymnal.com)

- 1. O God of mercy, God of light. #397**
- 2. May we Thy Precepts Lord, fulfill. #389**
- 3. Hope of the world. #377**