

Cling to the Lord **Joshua 23**

We are continuing in our series through the Old Testament book of Joshua. Next week will be the final week before we go to 1 Peter for the fall.

As a reminder, last Sunday we jumped from chapter 10 all the way to chapter 21 and looked at a few verses which summed up that section and, in reality, summed up the entire book of Joshua. It was the declaration that God had given rest to Israel, had given them the land he had promised them, and thus, all of the good promises of the Lord had come true; none had failed.

So, we talked about the faithfulness of the Lord last week, that he is both faithful and he is sovereign. That these are the twin truths that reassure us he *will* keep his promises and he *can* keep his promises.

Today we are going to be in Joshua 23. So we are skipping chapter 22, which tells the account of a big misunderstanding between some of the tribes of Israel, but it all gets sorted out; check that out this week.

But Joshua 23, where we will be today, and Joshua 24, where we will be next week, conclude the story of Joshua. And these two chapters record for us two farewell speeches by Joshua just before his death.

What I want to do this week is just read the entire chapter up front, and then we will go back through it...

Joshua 23:1-16

1 A long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, **2** Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old and well advanced in years **3** And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the Lord your God who has fought for you. **4** Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. **5** The Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you. **6** Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the

Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, **7** that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, **8** but you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day. **9** For the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. **10** One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. **11** Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God. **12** For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, **13** know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

14 “And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed. **15** But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you, **16** if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.”

So, in this next to last chapter we have the next to last speech given by Joshua to the leaders of Israel. He's older now. We know at the end of the book, Joshua passes away when he is 110 years old (24:29), so he is up there at this point.

And in this speech, Joshua reminds them of what the Lord has accomplished for them in bringing them to the Promised Land, fighting on their behalf, and giving the land to them. He is once again pointing them back to the faithfulness of God.

But then, he pivots and calls Israel to be faithful to the Lord. And this is an important part of the book. The first 21 chapters of Joshua focus on the faithfulness of God to his people. But now, the last three chapters are just the opposite. These are all about the faithfulness of God's people to the Lord.

And so Joshua says to them, “Alright, God has been faithful to you, don't forget it, now be faithful to him.” And the specific way they were to be faithful to the Lord was not to mix with the surrounding nations. That meant to not adopt their ideology, theology, or cultural practices.

And a significant part of them being separate from other nations was not marrying people from those nations, which, I know sounds wrong to our modern ears, even racist, but the danger for Israel in marrying people from other pagan nations was not

due to ethnic differences but religious differences. If they were to marry others from pagan nations, they would be tempted to worship their god or gods.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

And there really was no greater call for the nation of Israel than to be wholly faithful to God. If you remember when God makes his covenant with Moses at Mt. Sinai, he gives them the Ten Commandments and the very first commandment is all about their exclusive worship of God.

Exodus 20 is where we find this account...

Exodus 20:1-3

1 And God spoke all these words, saying, **2** “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **3** “You shall have no other gods before me.

Israel was created to be and called to be God’s people. And God is “holy,” which means he is absolute moral purity. This means that he is set apart from all others, for there is no one else of whom this can be said. Israel, as God’s people, was created for and called to be “holy,” set apart from all other nations on earth. They were to reflect, as the set apart people of God, their God who is set apart in his holiness.

But this required that they pursued holiness in their lives. God was in effect, saying, “I am commanding this of *you*, because you are called to reflect *me*. I am requiring this of *you*, because this is true of *me*.”

To be in relationship to the holy Lord, they, and we, must be holy ourselves.

THE CALL TO CLING

And there is a keyword in this passage that we can’t miss when it comes to the call for God’s people to be faithful to the Lord, it is used two times in this chapter, and it is first seen in verse 8...

Joshua 23:6-8

6 Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, **7** that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, **8** but you shall ***cling*** to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day.

Again, Israel was to “cling” to the Lord. Of course, we all know what it means to “cling” to something or someone. You hold tightly onto something. You don’t want to let it go, you do everything in your power to hold on to it, you don’t want to lose it, you don’t want it to slip through your grasp.

The word translated “cling” in this translation is a significant word here but it is used in other places in the Old Testament as well to describe someone or an army chasing hard after someone else or overtaking someone in battle. It is the root for another Hebrew word used to describe the soldering process of a craftsman in Isaiah 41. And it is even the basis for the modern Hebrew word for “glue.”

All of that to say, it carries with it the idea of holding onto something so tightly you could be described as soldered to that thing, as passionately pursuing the thing, as glued to that thing.

If you are a parent you probably understand the idea of kids being glued to the TV or their devices. Not just our kids, of course, we, too, might be glued to our phones, or we might be glued to our best friends or our significant other. In other words, we cling to this thing or this person with such commitment that it seems as if we are inseparable and no one and nothing can come between us.

This is how Israel was called to relate to the Lord.

In fact, to see how important this relationship is we should see that it is the same Hebrew word that is used to speak of the relationship between a husband and a wife in Genesis 2:24..

Genesis 2:24

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and **hold fast** to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Just as a husband is called to “hold fast” or “cling” to his wife in covenant faithfulness, God’s people are called to do the same with the Lord.

And, by the way, this is emphasized when later on when Israel is not faithful to the Lord, their sin is described as *adultery*. They’ve failed to be faithful to the Lord. They’ve gone after other gods. In effect, they’ve clung to, they’ve chased hard after, they’ve glued themselves to, **not the Lord, but rather, someone thing or someone else.**

And this is the warning to Israel here. Notice in verse 11 and following, the second usage of this word in this chapter...

Joshua 23:11-13

11 Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God. **12** For if you turn back and **cling** to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, **13** know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

Notice the word “cling” is used again in verse 12. The warning is clear for them. Israel, you will either cling to the Lord or you will cling to the nations and everything that comes with them, namely other gods, or idols.

Which if you think about it, it might seem that this should be a no-brainer of instruction for them. After everything they've seen the Lord do for them, after coming to know the one, true living God who is Creator and Sustainer of all things, of course, they shouldn't go after other gods.

If we were playing a pick-up game of basketball and you had to choose between having me or LeBron James on your team, the choice should be obvious! It might surprise you but LeBron's probably a little better than me. To choose me would be foolish.

And, yet, this is a valid warning for Israel, because **idolatry** is a major problem for Israel for just about every era in its history...

Just a few chapters to the right of where we are now in Judges 2, we see Israel turn away from God and serve the Baals, false gods of the people in the land.

Later, at the height of Israel's prosperity and glory, King Solomon turned from the Lord in 1 Kings 11 and because of God's judgment, Israel is split into two different kingdoms.

And then, idolatry ends up being the cause of the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 2 Kings 17. It's the cause of the fall of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 2 Kings 21 & 24.

Even in the period after they are in exile, when they surely should have known better, they turn away again from the Lord in idolatry in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13.

So, this was a serious warning for them, that unfortunately isn't always heeded.

WHAT IS IDOLATRY?

The truth is, not only Israel, but we, too, a people created by and called by the Lord, need to have a good grasp of the dangers of idolatry if we are to faithfully follow our God.

So, understand that God is not the biggest and most powerful god in the universe while there exists a bunch of other little, lesser gods or deities under his dominion. There is only one God, however in our depravity, mankind *creates* “gods” out of things and people. *These* are idols.

Paul talks about this in Romans 1, when he says that humanity has...

Romans 1:25

“...exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”

There is God and there is creation. And idolatry is us worshipping creation rather than the Creator. And we've seen this throughout history and still today around the world, cultures and religions that worship the sun, moon, or stars, or some other aspect of the created world.

But we need to understand that idols can be much more than just trinkets, statues, or nature that we literally bow to or pray to in formal worship. Idols are much more prevalent and covert than we often realize.

Tim Keller wrote a book about this, *Counterfeit Gods*, and this is how he defines the idols of our lives.

An idol “is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving ‘face’ and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry.”

Which, if we just stop there for a second, can be really confusing, because those things that he listed are not necessarily bad. These are many good things in life. So the question is how do we make good things into idols? Keller goes on to say...

“An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’ There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*.”¹

Author Elyse Fitzpatrick agrees with Keller in her book, *Idols of the Heart*...

“Idols aren’t just stone statues. No, idols are the loves, thoughts, desires, longings, and expectations that we worship in the place of the true God. They

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead, 2009), xix-xx. Emphasis original.

are the things that we invest our identity in; they are what we trust. Idols cause us to disregard our heavenly Father in search of what we think we need. Our idols are our loves-gone-wrong: all those things we love more than we love Him, the things we trust for our righteousness or ‘okay-ness.’”²

So, key to understanding idolatry is that the root of our idolatry is misplaced love. Again, “idols are our loves-gone-wrong.” And this why Israel was commanded to be careful that they “love [their] God.”

Joshua 23:11

11 Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God.

And, of course, the call is the same for us today. Remember Jesus said in Matthew 22...

Matthew 22:37-38

37 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38** This is the great and first commandment.

Why was Israel to be careful to love the Lord? Why is the greatest commandment of all to love the Lord? Because a misplaced love leads to idolatry. It leads us to follow and worship a false, created god. But a created god is not a god at all. It is fake, without power, without glory, without majesty, unable to satisfy, unable to save, unable to give meaning, purpose, significance. In fact, rather than giving, false gods only take. Filled with promises of fulfillment, they lead only to emptiness.

So, like Israel, we are to “cling” to the Lord rather than “cling” to other gods. How might we identify those idols in our lives?

Keller offers some diagnostic questions here for some help.

1. “What do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?”³

In other words, our imagination, where our thoughts run to when nothing else is demanding our attention can be an indicator of our true gods.

2. How do you spend your money?

Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 6...

Mathew 6:21

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

² Elyse M. Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart: Learning to Love God Alone* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2016), ebook.

³ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 168.

Where we spend money can show us what we truly value, what we esteem worth to, in other words, what we worship.

3. What are your most “uncontrollable emotions,” that is, “your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong.”

In other words, “If you are angry, ask, ‘Is there something here too important to me, something I must have at all costs?’” Or with despair, strong fear, or guilt, ask, “Am I so scared, because something in my life is being threatened that I think is a necessity when it is not? Am I so down on myself because I have lost or failed at something that I think is a necessity when it is not?”

We should pull our emotions up by the roots and when we do we will often find our idols clinging to them.⁴

I think it is a good opportunity for us this morning to reflect on what idols might be present in our lives, what things which might be good things, have you given too much worth to, making them not just a good thing but a god?

Ask yourself, What/Who could you not let go of in order to faithfully follow the Lord? What are you soldered to, cemented to, glued to, that you can’t seem to lay down that you might cling to the Lord?

- What is keeping you from being the faithful husband/wife that you are called to be?
- What is keeping you from being a faithful member of the church community?
- What is keeping you from showing grace, forgiveness, and love to others in the church?
- What is keeping you from loving my neighbor as you are called to do?

What are you clinging to that you can’t seem to lay down to faithfully follow the Lord?

Again, whatever that thing is, or person is, has become your idol. It is the thing you are clinging to instead of the Lord. It is the thing or person that *truly* has your heart.

This is a danger for us today, but this was certainly a threat to Israel then as well. In fact, thinking again on Joshua 23, consider the consequences of them turning away from the Lord - they would be driven out of the land that they were given by the Lord. This shows just how serious it is for God’s people to follow God faithfully. They would lose the very thing that was promised to them in the covenant with their father, Abraham.

⁴ Ibid., 169-170.

And the truth is, God showed incredible patience with Israel over many years of unfaithfulness, until the exile when judgment and the fulfillment of this warning came to them. There was a limit to God's patience on them as a nation. They *would* eventually be driven from the land in exile because they were unfaithful.

WHAT ABOUT US?

I think that the natural question as we look at this chapter is to ask, What does this have to do with us today? We know we are called by God as his people to be holy, to be faithful, to follow him and lay down any other idols we might have. So the call to holy living is the same, does this mean that the consequence for being unfaithful is the same too? Will God cast us out if we are found to be unfaithful? Will God remove us from his people if we have an unhealthy attachment to money, or relationships, or success, or some other idol?

Well, in order to apply Scripture correctly, a helpful thing to do is to consider what is the *same* between us today and the context in Scripture, but we also need to consider what is *different* about our context and that of the passage of Scripture that we are reading. And there are massive differences here as we read Joshua.

The main differences are that we, as the church, are not ethnic Israel. We are not under the Old Covenant established between God and Israel through the law given to Moses. No, we are under the New Covenant established for us by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And this brings with it tremendous news.

This is tremendous news because, if we are being honest with ourselves this morning, we can probably immediately identify the ways in which we have misplaced our love, giving it to something or someone other than God. And this ought to bring with it a sense of conviction and desire to turn once again back to the Lord in repentance.

But because of Christ, we have tremendous news to rest in, even in our unfaithfulness. It is the good news that, ***even when we have failed to cling to the Lord, in Christ, the Lord clings to us.***

In fact, his work in keeping us close to Him is so determined, so committed, and so sure that in the New Testament it is described as a Trinitarian work. In other words, each Person of the Godhead works to keep us in our salvation.

Jesus said in John 6:37-40...

John 6:37-40

37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. **38** For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. **39** And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. **40** For this is the will of my

Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Who will come to Jesus? "All" whom the Father has given to the Son and whoever comes to Jesus will never be cast out by Jesus. He "clings" to them as his own.

Later Jesus said this of the Father in John 10...

John 10:27-30

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **28** I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. **29** My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. **30** I and the Father are one."

Both God the Son and God the Father actively clinging to the sheep.

And we are told of the work of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1...

Ephesians 1:13-14

13 In [Jesus] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. Again, Father, Son, and Spirit, clinging to us, His children, even when we are unfaithful to Him. Why?

Because Jesus, the true and better Israel, was faithful on our behalf. And because of our repentant faith in Him, we are united to Him and found faithful. And now, God will not cast us out, will not allow us to be snatched out of his hand, will not let the seal placed on us by the Spirit be removed, because we are in Christ. And one day, we will be brought to the true and eternal Promised Land where we will never be cast out, but rather will be kept for all eternity.

Yes, we should lay down our idols. Ask the Lord to help you see them. Ask the Lord to help you see their lesser glory compared to the immeasurable glory of the Lord. Cling to the Lord and rest in the truth that he clings to you.

VERSES

Joshua 23:1-16

Exodus 20:1-3

Joshua 23:6-8
Genesis 2:24
Joshua 23:11-13
Romans 1:25
Joshua 23:11
Matthew 22:37-38
Matthew 6:21
John 6:37-40
John 10:27-30
Ephesians 1:13-14

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

When you hear the word “cling” what image comes to mind?

What are some common idols in our culture today?

After some time of reflection, what idols can you identify in your own heart?

Read Colossians 3:1-4. How do we battle the idols of our minds and hearts?

What might the significance be that this speech was delivered to the *leaders* of Israel?

Though Israel was threatened with judgment for their unfaithfulness, how does the gospel speak to our assurance of salvation?