

Sermon Theme: We Will Serve the Lord

**Sermon Reading: Joshua 24:1, 2, 14-18**

When you die, what will you be known for? When your family sits down with the pastor to plan your funeral, what will they say was most important in your life? Or how about if someone were to watch you and this next week, what would they say is most important to you?

The leader Joshua was now old, well-advanced in years, and nearing his own death (Joshua 23:1). After leading the nation of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan and conquering much of the land, Joshua's watch has ended. But before he officially is finished, he has one final thing to do. He gathers the people of Israel and speaks to them God's words. In verses 3-13 (not part of the sermon reading) Joshua recounts what the Lord had done for his people. He starts when God had chosen Abraham to be the father of this nation and continues down through history to how they got to where they were today. The Lord, speaking through his servant Joshua, wants his people to hear, understand, and take to heart that it wasn't their own strength and capabilities that brought them to this point. No, it was the Lord who worked for them, through them, and gave them this land as he promised he would.

Recognizing these gifts and how God had carried out his promise, Joshua says, "**Fear the Lord and serve him.**" Understand what the Lord is capable of doing, what he has done, and give him the due respect and honor. And in order to do this, Joshua tells the people, "**Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.**" Evidently the people had held onto some of the foreign gods of their ancestors. They knew the Lord but they kept these old gods around. Even after they had left Egypt and while the Lord was fighting on their side conquering the Promised Land, they would not let go of these false gods. How could they do something like that? Why did they hold on so tightly to these false gods?

It really isn't all that shocking especially when we think about our own lives. You may not bow down and worship figurines carved from wood or stone but there are gods in our lives that are just as false, just as dangerous to our relationship with God, just as sinful, and just as difficult to let go of. There's the god of money. We worship it when working to earn more money takes the place of making time for God; saving/spending money first for me instead of giving the first and best to God; not feeling comfortable, confident, or fulfilled unless there is a certain amount of money in the bank account. There's the god of family where maintaining peace with your spouse and comfort of home and family relations becomes more important than your relationship with God and following his will. There's the god of children or grandchildren that you try finding fulfillment in making them happy and maintaining

their happiness. There's the god of school where grades and social life take the place of personal devotional time. There's the god of sports, and not just the professional sports either. Grade school, middle school, high school athletes and supporters worship at the cathedral of the field or gym in place of spending time with God—not just on Sundays but during the week too—all in the name of experience and life lessons. There's the god of self and personal desires and pleasures, doing what you want and feel like instead of following God's will. We could go on and on. Whatever it is that you place more importance, find more fulfillment, lean on, depend on, and love more than the Lord, has become a false god. Sometimes that false god can be obvious; many times it's only between your heart and the one true God.

What the Lord is saying to his people is you can't serve both. So get rid of them; remove those false god from your presence. So the Lord is speaking to you today: get rid of, throw away those false gods your sinful nature clings to. You cannot serve both. Those things (and so many others) may not be sinful in themselves; in fact, they are often blessings God gives to us. But our sinful natures and this sinful world corrupts and turns so that these can end up leading you away from God. Be honest with yourself because God already knows.

Joshua, almost sarcastically, challenges the people to choose who they will serve. If serving the Lord wasn't desirable to them: **will you serve the gods of your ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living?** Will you serve the true Lord and God or these fake figurines your ancestors and the people around you worship that do nothing? You can look at it as a challenge to you today too. Will you prefer to serve the gods of your ancestors, fall into the same sins and habits of parents, grandparents? Will you prefer to serve the gods of the world around you that might make life a little more convenient right now, more comfortable, or allow you to fit in with the people around you? Will you follow that which will gives you momentary happiness, a little peace, but in the long run is never lasting? What is most important to you? Who will you serve?

We have Joshua's answer: **“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”** In light of the blessings God had given to his people, the fulfillment of his promise to give them that Promised Land, the confidence and assurance that he would send a Savior, Joshua knew who he would follow. This isn't decision theology taking place where Joshua is making a personal commitment to God. God has already worked faith in his heart and that heart of faith desired to serve God. You cannot choose to be saved. Having been saved completely and having faith working in your heart, you can choose how you are going to live your life and who you will serve. Working through his promises in his Word and working through his Sacraments God makes the unwilling willing to serve him and him alone.

After Joshua's response, the people were on fire for the Lord. **"Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!"** That faith that God worked in their hearts, the evidence they saw in their lives and the lives of their forefathers, that knowledge in their minds, encouraged the people: **"We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God."** So bold, so confident.

Yet, in a generation these people start serving the other gods of the people living in their land. They did the exact thing they promised they would not do. Again shows the great importance and need to teach the next generation. Understand that God does not hold you responsible for the sinful choices of another individual. He does hold you accountable to be faithful with the duties he has given to you whether that is as a parent or a child. It shows how important it is for us to get rid of those false gods in our lives.

It's another warning for us too because we see in our own lives how quickly an attitude can change. You confess your sins in worship, you sing God's praises, confess your faith—not too different from the Israelites. But then do you even make it past the church doors before falling into sin and temptation again? Do you at least make it into your car? Think of Peter in the Gospel reading today and his bold statement, **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"** (John 6:68). And not too long after that he will deny even knowing Jesus when Jesus is arrested and taken before the high priest. We can point all we want to other examples of individuals who were at one time solid, strong, and bold in their statement of faith but then slowly drifted away. But we dare not forget the need to take a good hard look at ourselves in the mirror of God's Law. You know how the Old Man of sin, that sinful nature, too easily and way too many times rears its ugly head where we know what we should do, but don't, or we know that we shouldn't, but then do. Then there are the other times when there seems to be hardly any struggle at all against sin, and you just do it because you want to.

It really shows how completely corrupting the sinful nature is. That sinful nature hates God's will and has no desire to serve him. It hears God's commands and his expectations and they are too great, he's asking too much, and it's just not fair. There's no part of me by nature that would choose to serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God, as we confess in the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Apostles' Creed, God did not save us by our own thinking or choosing. But he has called you by the gospel, enlightened you with his gifts, set you apart—made you holy—and kept you in the true faith. Your God remains a God of grace who never tires of forgiving you your sins. He is your God whose Son speaks to you the words that give you eternal life. Despite your sinfulness and in spite of your continued struggle with sin, Jesus came so that all who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. You were a slave to sin, the devil, and death but Jesus has broken those chains and set you free. Sin does not have control you, the devil has no power over you, and death has lost its

sting. Jesus has fixed your relationship with God so you are not his enemy but you are at one with him and God's will. In the waters of baptism that Old Man of sin was drowned and you were made a new creation: God's child with whom he is well-pleased when you serve him.

Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve. As it was for the Israelites so it is for you; the Lord is speaking to that New Man, the child of God. Again, that Old Man of sin cannot nor would it want to serve God. But the New Man—you with a heart faith—recognizing God's grace and mercy, wants to serve him. And so daily we go to battle against the Old Man. Daily we want to repent when we have served other gods and not the one true Lord, daily we fight to turn away from those false gods, daily we die to sin. And daily we are raised to life in the forgiveness of sins won for you by Jesus, given to you because of his undeserving love and grace which is yours by faith. From him, you have the words and are given eternal life. What is most important to you? Whom will you serve? In that peace of forgiveness, we will serve the Lord. Amen.