

“God Takes Church Seriously”

Joshua 7b

December 15, 2002

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Your friend called early and asked if he could have lunch with you today.

He said it was urgent and so you changed an appointment to accommodate him.

When he showed up at the restaurant, it was obvious he was distressed and as soon as the food was ordered he came right to the point.

He wanted to know if he could move into your basement for a while until he found his own place.

Your heart sank as you just knew what was coming.

You'd been friends with him and his wife long enough to notice that things weren't what they were supposed to be between them.

He said he'd finally decided to leave his wife - it had been a long time coming.

And then he spilled out a sad story of love-less-ness that existed almost from the beginning.

He said he thought he loved her when he married her but it soon became apparent that he was just temporarily infatuated.

The truth is they never had much in common and it wasn't long before they just drifted apart.

Yes, she had tried to get them to see the pastor or talk to a friend about what they might do to re-ignite their relationship but he admitted he wasn't interested.

He went on to say that his wife was a nice enough person but he just didn't want to be married to her anymore.

Yes, he knew that sounded pretty lame but certainly God didn't expect him to go through life living with someone he didn't love.

He was sure, in the long run, it would be better for her as well - after all she shouldn't have to be tied to a guy who didn't love her.

What do you say in a situation like that? What do you do?

Do you let him move into the basement?

This is your friend, do you challenge him?

Do you intervene?

What if he persists in this decision and moves out - how do you treat him then?

Since you are both members of the same church and claim to be Christians should you contact one of the pastors or elders of the church?

What should the church do if the man persists and divorces his wife?

Is it really anyone else's business?

Is it the church's business?

While it would be sad for his family and friends, even if he does divorce his wife what difference will that make to the church?

Again, isn't this just **his** business?

Step away from that specific illustration for a few minutes and **look with me at the larger picture of God's purposes in the world as we see them in the Bible.**

The theme of the Bible, both OT and NT, is the kingdom of God – the rule of God over his creation, in history and eternity.

Let me give you a very brief summary of the Bible in four parts:

1. God created the universe with people to live in relationship with him and each other.

2. Sin destroyed that relationship and the Bible is the record of God's gracious work to restore the intended relationships by recreating them.

3. The first Adam was father of a people who are fatally corrupted by sin.

Jesus, the last Adam (as Paul calls him in 1 Corinthians), is father of a people made righteous by grace through faith.

4. In and through that redeemed people, God will eventually restore his creation (the entire universe with humanity) to its intended place – living in perfect relationship with him and each other.

Christianity then is not just about us going to heaven when we die.

Christianity is about us being the people of God, instrumental in the expanding kingdom of God.

With that in mind, remember the purpose of ancient Israel, under Moses' and then Joshua's leadership, was not just about getting a home for a bunch of refugees from Egypt.

Israel was God's people commissioned by God to be doing God's kingdom business of reclaiming the world for God.

As I said several weeks ago, the Promised Land was to be a beachhead for the larger work God was doing in the whole world.

After Israel left Egypt, and as they approached the time when they would invade Canaan to reclaim it as the Promised Land, Moses warned them.

If they didn't do as God commanded, notice what would happen to them.

Deuteronomy 20:16-18 "However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them--the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God. (Destroy it all and them all.)

I addressed God's justice in this genocide in the sermon two weeks ago.

So notice instead how God is very clear about the impact those other people will have on God's People, Israel, if they let them remain.

God has no plan "B"; **his people are his means** for accomplishing his purpose of restoring his kingly rule over the world.

And therefore God will protect his people.

He does not want them rendered ineffective by sin.

After Joshua assumed leadership of the people of Israel and just before they went against Jericho, Joshua said:

Joshua 6:18-19, When we enter the city after its defeat, "keep away from the devoted things (that property and people God says must be destroyed), so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of **Israel** liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."

But when we come to Joshua 7 we find that one man named Achan, or Achan to Anglicize it, didn't obey.

As we saw last week, 36 people die in the futile battle against the city of Ai.

Joshua can't figure out what has happened – God fought for them at Jericho and then they are defeated by the much weaker city Ai.

When Joshua calls out to God, God tells him that one in their midst had violated the ban on the property of Jericho and had taken for himself what belonged to God.

But in the text the Lord doesn't say only one man has sinned.

Joshua 7:10-12 "The LORD said to Joshua... Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not

be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

Who sinned? Somehow the sin of one is the sin of all.

We find the same thing at the beginning of the chapter:

Joshua 7:1 “But the Israelites acted unfaithfully

One man sinned and it affected them all.

How did it affect them?

They were defeated.

The very thing they were called by God to do they were incapable of doing.

They had been called to possess the Promised Land and they were stopped cold.

God then had Joshua determine who it was that had brought this trouble on all Israel and had the culprit, Achan, and his family and all his belongings destroyed by stoning and fire.

With that striking example, God makes his point that his people must be decisive in dealing with sin in their midst because God knows that sin is like a cancer that will grow and destroy his people and the mission.

God’s clear concern was that **if his people didn’t completely separate from the evil practices** of the nations around them, **his people would be ensnared by those practices** and chase after other things instead of following God and pursuing his kingdom purposes.

And over time that is precisely what happened.

In the next book of the Bible called Judges, we learn that the Israelites didn’t do what God told them to do.

They didn’t completely drive out the evil inhabitants of Canaan – The Promised Land.

Mentioning by name six of the 12 tribes of Israel God says:

Judges 1 “The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites... Manasseh did not drive out the people... Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites... Neither did Zebulun drive out the

Canaanites... Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon... Neither did Naphtali drive out those living in Beth Shemesh or Beth Anath...”

And we then learn that what God had said would happen is exactly what did happen.

Israel was ensnared by the people they hadn't removed from the land.

Judges 2:10-15 “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.’

And look at the result: “The Lord was against them.”

Finally by the time of Samuel the people were so characterized by sin that God allowed the Ark of the Covenant to be taken captive by the enemy of Israel.

Remember that the Ark was the symbol of God's presence among his people.

The Ark was held up in the middle of the Jordan River as the people crossed over.

The Ark was prominently carried around the city of Jericho before the miraculous collapse of the walls and the defeat of that city.

So symbolically-significant was that Ark that when it was removed from the Tabernacle, the daughter-in-law of the Priest Eli prematurely delivered a son shortly before she died.

Here's what the Bible says:

1 Samuel 4:21,22 "She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel"--because of the capture of the ark of God...

She knew exactly what the Ark's departure meant.

God had withdrawn his presence from his people.

He was no longer with them and fighting for them but was now against them.

How many churches today are "Ichabod"?

How many of our churches are strong institutionally but anemic spiritually?

Are we one of them?

Have we allowed sin in our lives and our midst to the extent that God has left us and we are impotent to effect change in our own lives much less in the lives of others?

I'm not presupposing the answer to that question simply by asking it.

But I do think it is an important question to consider.

The presence of God is essential in accomplishing the mission God has given us.

Now it's true that if we are simply playing church it won't matter if God is present or not.

I suppose there are some who think of church as simply a social institution where they have friends, make business contacts and keep their kids positively occupied and off the streets.

The presence of God is not needed to operate such a church.

And there are others who think of church as attending a church, and that as part of their obligation of being a "good" Christian.

Last week I was with a man who said, "I know I'm not a good Christian – I don't get to church as much as I should."

If that's what Christianity and church are about - the presence of God isn't needed to operate such a church.

Still others think church is the place where individuals address the issue of their own relationship to God and how best to **get** that relationship **and keep** it, so that when they die they won't end up in the wrong place.

But if we reduce Christianity largely, if not solely, to a matter of each person avoiding hell and getting to heaven when he/she dies we miss the major theme of the Bible.

The Bible is not merely about my salvation from hell – the Bible is about the Kingdom of God growing in my life and yours and in the lives of others until the world is restored to God's rule.

And without the presence of God, that won't happen.

Without the presence of God, this church is dead in the water.

And the presence of God is not indicated by the “goose bumps” created by certain musical chords or drum beats.

The presence of the Lord is not noted by hearing “the brush of angel wings” as popularized in a chorus of a few years ago.

The presence of God is indicated by changed lives, an expanded Kingdom.

Moses knew he had to have God's presence to accomplish the purposes of God.

When God told him to lead the people of Israel, Moses said in Exodus 33:15 "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here."

And when we come to Joshua 7 and the account of the sin of Achan we learn that is exactly what is at stake – **the presence of God**.

It is worth noting that the entire chapter is structured around the last half of the 12th verse.

God's wrath (burning) (1)
 Disaster for Israel (2-5)
 Leaders before God perplexed (6-9)
 Divine revelation of problem (9-12a)
 Midpoint (12b)
 Divine instruction for solution (13-15)
 Israel before God (16-23)
 Disaster for Achan (24-26a)
 God's wrath turned away (26b)

(From Dale Davis No Falling Words 59)

And what is that midpoint?

7:12b God says, "**I will not be with you anymore** ..."

We are not God's people if God is not with us.

Sin has a devastating effect on the life and mission of the church and sin must be dealt with decisively or "Ichabod" may be written on the door.

God loves his church (He died for it) and thus he hates whatever would hurt or destroy his church and deter it from its mission.

- That's why Achan was judged.
- That's why this church must take sin seriously and deal with it decisively.

We won't understand God's wrath against sin in an Achan, or a disobedient Israel, or us, until we understand his love.

If you have a weak love you will have a weak hate.

I hate cancer when it invades the body of one I truly love.

And God is passionate about his church and hates whatever would destroy it.

And so we see in the story of Achan that God will deal decisively with sin and he calls his people to deal decisively with sin because his love for his people is so great.

What does that mean? Do Christians and churches go on “witch hunts”?

Do we set up little KGB units throughout the church and encourage children to tell on their parents?

Do we publicly chastise everyone who is doing anything wrong?

Of course not!

God makes it very clear in the Bible what we are to do.

Gal 6:1, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him GENTLY.”

2 Corinthians 2:7-8, In your correction of a brother, after he repents, “forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by sorrow. I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him.”

And in the longest and most detailed instruction on discipline in the New Testament - in Matthew 18 - Jesus makes it clear that the purpose of correction is to correct - the purpose of discipline is to restore and heal.

Pity the child who has a parent who doesn’t love him enough to say “no” and back it up with loving discipline.

Pity the man or woman who doesn’t have a person who is friend enough to say “no” and back it up with loving correction.

And Jesus says pity the church that doesn’t care enough for its people to say “no” and back it up with gentle, affirming, loving, and yet firm discipline.

I well remember the woman who attended our Partnership classes who, when she heard about church discipline, called me later and said the church has no business knowing or commenting on how people live their personal lives.

And she quit the class and stopped coming to the church.

Try as I would, I could not convince her that love is a higher value than tolerance.

In the church of Jesus Christ we are to love people enough to care about their lives.

Writing to the churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John severely chastises the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira and threatens judgment because they were tolerating flagrant sin in their midst.

In the book of Acts, as the church was being established, God dealt very directly with sin in the church.

Husband and wife, Ananias and Saphira, were struck dead by God when they lied about their money.

The point, made twice in that text, was that “great fear seized the whole church...” – God was making a point!

God’s people are so vulnerable to sin and so precious to God that he will judge sin severely and expects his people to do the same in their own lives and in the church.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and told them to expel an unrepentant immoral man from their church.

And his reason is stated clearly, “Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?”

If you tolerate unrepented sin in your midst, it will eventually destroy you.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Joshua 7 and the story of Achan is a lesson to God’s people about how seriously God takes sin and how seriously his people should.

This is not judgmentalism, but it is caring enough to confront - loving enough to correct.

What about the man who is leaving his wife and asks to stay in your basement?

What do you say and what do you do?

What is the church to do about those who claim to be Christians but are willfully, flagrantly, defiantly ignoring God’s will?

We must lovingly confront.
Saying nothing and doing nothing is not an
option God has given us.

Distributed with the bulletin today is a copy of Southern Gables' church discipline policy.

If you consider Gables your church home and you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your saving Lord then you are this church.

God help us deal with sin with the love and grace of the Lord Jesus, but God help us deal with sin.

Do we love God, his church and each other enough to call sin "sin"?

Appendix

CHURCH DISCIPLINE of the Partnership of SOUTHERN GABLES CHURCH

We, the Partners in Ministry (members) of Southern Gables Church, believe we are called to join with each other for the purposes of helping one another grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ and be effective in building the Kingdom of God. Our love for one another and our holiness of life are our greatest testimonies to the world around us of God's transforming love.

We believe God has called us to encourage each other and hold each other accountable for our growth in Christ-likeness. That encouragement and accountability are to be administered with mercy and grace, recognizing that God's work in each life is unique.

We further believe God has given his church (meaning the local church acting in concert, not just individuals in the church) the responsibility for discipline when a Partner disobeys God's Word. **Discipline is always for the purpose of restoring a Christian to Christ-like living and never for the purpose of revenge or punishment.** While Christians often differ on lifestyle issues, only such conduct as is expressly commanded or forbidden in Scriptures should be the grounds for discipline.

Using Matthew 18 as our guideline, we believe it is the responsibility of a Christian to lovingly confront a Christian friend when that friend is harming himself/herself and the church by his/her disobedient conduct.

If that confrontation does not result in a change of behavior, the Christian is responsible to take one or two other **MATURE** believers and once again confront the Christian - pleading with him/her to stop his/her sinful behavior.

If that confrontation does not result in a change of behavior, the Elders of the Church should be informed. The Elders may then ask the Church (in a duly called business meeting) to join the Elders in calling upon the sinning Christian to change his/her behavior.

If the Christian ignores all prior counsel, including the plea by the Church, the Elders shall ask the Church to remove the person from the Partnership of the Church. If the Church agrees, such a person will be contacted and encouraged to continue attending the church for teaching in the Word but informed that they will no longer be treated as a fellow-believer. They are to be loved as an unbeliever whom we are seeking to bring to faith and repentance.

Upon confession of their sin and repentance (a demonstrated commitment to obedience) a person removed from the Partnership of the Church may be restored to Partnership through the normal means of applying for Partnership.

Please remember God's discipline of us (even His discipline of us through His church) is because of his love. Discipline is always for the purpose of restoring a Christian to Christ-like living and never for the purpose of revenge or punishment. Even what is commonly called “excommunication” is for the primary purpose of encouraging repentance.

SUPPORTING TEXTS OF SCRIPTURE

Galatians 6:1 “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

Hebrews 12:5-11 “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent--not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he

refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15 “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us... If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

1 Corinthians 5:1-5 “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

Approved by the Elders July 2001