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THE WOLF IN THE RESTAURANT Joshua 5

We have all seen fake luxury items. Maybe you've encountered a phony Rolex watch or Gucci bag. I recently saw pictures on the internet of some classic knockoff toys like a fake Batman figurine called Superbat or another action hero called Spaderman, an obvious copy of Spiderman. Then there was the little barrel shaped robot that looked suspiciously like R2 D2 from *Star Wars* only this one was labeled "Space Wars." But the classic was a figurine labeled "Uncle Sam." Only it was Colonel Sanders.

Fakes like that are easily detected and downright laughable. Some fakes though are just sad. In August of 2012 *Sports Illustrated* conducted a survey of Major League Baseball Players. One of the questions they asked them was "who do you think is the phoniest player in baseball?" Can you guess who won? It was Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez. That can't feel very good.

Phony humans are often a lot easier to detect than they think they are. Have you ever had the experience of encountering a sales person who is super friendly and tries to make a connection with you? You know very well that what he cares about is not being your friend but selling you something? It's amazing how religious some sales people become when they find out I'm a pastor. It's just phony much of the time and it's annoying. No one likes phony.

In the spiritual realm if you are phony you are a hypocrite, and no one wants that. Everyone pretty much despises hypocrisy. But we know that there is an element of phoniness in all of us. Every single one of us has a gap between what we profess to be, what we want to be, and what we actually are. How can we reduce the dissonance between what we say we are and what we actually are? We are going to consider today how we can lessen the "phony" factor in our faith and practice. We are going to take a look at some people who were not quite the real thing. Their story is in Joshua 5, and from it we will learn two ways to be phony in our faith. Obviously my desire is that we learn not to do the things I will identify today. As a result hopefully we will be less phony and more real in our faith as we put into practice what we learn today.

If you want to be phony:

KEEP *SOME* OF THE RULES

In Joshua 5:1-3 we see that Joshua was told by the Lord to circumcise the new generation of Israel. They had to be circumcised because as verse 5 says, “all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not.” They had not been circumcised. Why weren’t they circumcised? My first thought had to do with what the Lord tells Joshua in verse 2. “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” He was supposed to circumcise them with flint knives! Can you imagine how that felt? These men were as much as 40 years old and they were going to be circumcised with dull knives made out of rocks. Just reading it made me cringe. How painful was that?

Being circumcised with a sharp rock was not something any man would be anxious to sign up for. My guess is that generation of Israeli men were sort of hoping the circumcision thing was just for that first group that were rescued out of Egypt and that maybe they could just skip it. However, the fact that this new generation had to be circumcised just before entering Canaan is significant.

The circumcision thing was first instituted by God with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. In Genesis 17:11-12 God said to him, “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.” Does anything jump out at you from those verses? Every male who is eight days old must be circumcised. That command was reiterated in Leviticus 12:3 just to make sure Israel heard it clearly. How come that generation of Israelis were not circumcised though now adults? Clearly their parents did not circumcise them when they were eight days old. They didn’t do what God commanded.

There is a key phrase in Joshua 5:6. “The Israelites had moved about in the desert forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, **since they had not obeyed the Lord.**” That was the heart of the problem. They had not obeyed the Lord. That phrase specifically referred to their refusal to enter the land of Canaan when God commanded them to the first time. But it was unfortunately too often true that they simply did not obey God. The fact that they hadn’t circumcised their sons is but another example.

Unfortunately that was not really an aberration. It was not like they obeyed God all along but got dinged for making one mistake. Their failure to obey God was all too consistent. Do you remember what happened after Israel refused to enter Canaan as God commanded? God told them they would all live the rest of their lives in the

desolate wilderness they had just left and they would die there. Numbers 14:39-40 tells us what happened next. “When Moses reported this to all the Israelites they mourned bitterly. Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. ‘We have sinned,’ they said. ‘We will go up to the place the Lord promised.’” Moses answered in verse 41, “Why are you disobeying the Lord?” They disobeyed when he said go into the land. Then when he said, “Fine, if you won’t obey then go back to the wilderness and die there,” and they disobeyed that command too. They tried to fight and they got their heads handed to them.

In Exodus 16 God sends manna for the people to eat in the desert. He gives them some rules for it. Gather only what you can eat for today and don’t try to store it overnight. One exception is on the 6th day of the week gather enough for 2 days and keep the second day’s ration for the Sabbath because there won’t be any manna on the Sabbath. Don’t try to gather manna on the Sabbath. So what happens? In verses 19-20 we read this. “Moses said to them, ‘No one is to keep any of it until morning.’ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning.” Then down in verses 27-28, “Some of the people went out on the 7th day to gather it, but they found none. Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?’” They obeyed the Lord sometimes, but not all the time. They had a covenant with God, they just never kept it with any consistency at all.

Of course in Jesus’ day that problem continued. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day, “Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.” They were outraged that Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. They were so scrupulous about keeping the Sabbath. But they failed to notice that they had zero compassion for a person in need of healing and even worse, they plotted to kill the most innocent man who ever lived because he disagreed with them.

Sadly that tendency for people of faith has not gone away. It is still common for people to have all the trappings of religion, but to in fact not obey God. It is terribly easy for us to go to church, say all the right words, take the Lord’s Supper, read our Bibles, pray, have all the trappings of religion, have our version of circumcision, but not actually obey God. Romans 2:23 says the circumcision that God really wants is circumcision of the heart. The outward thing was just a sign, a reminder, of what was to happen on the inside. All too often it doesn’t.

It's just so easy to fail to notice that for all our talk of obeying God and of having the Spirit of Jesus in us, we in fact don't live much like Jesus. We don't exude his Spirit at all. In his book, *A Traveler's Guide To The Kingdom*, James Emery White related an incident that happened when he was living in England. He went to a pub called the Eagle and Child, which is famous as the place where C. S. Lewis and his friends used to meet. He was sitting at his favorite table when a stream of tourists that had been in the pub left. He overheard the manager muttering, "Bloody Christians." White asked him what he meant. He explained that his menus cost him 2 pounds apiece. He had ordered hundreds of them but only had 10 left because the "bloody Christians" kept stealing them. Looking at some of the pictures and plaques on the wall, particularly a framed hand written letter signed by Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and others White said, "I'm surprised they don't try and take what's on your walls." The manager said, "Oh, those aren't real. Just copies. They still get taken. I'd never put the real ones up." Somehow it seems like followers of Jesus ought not to be stealing things.

I, unfortunately, do not always exude the Spirit of Jesus myself. While we were on vacation Laurie and I went to a Mexican restaurant one night. We enjoyed the fact that many of the restaurants in the area we were staying have live musicians to listen to while you eat. This restaurant, however, was on our list of places to save money. It is a low cost establishment so we did not anticipate any live music that evening. However, we were surprised to learn they also had live music. They had a man named "Nacho" playing the guitar and singing. Nacho was apparently the grandfather of Moses. Well at least he was old enough. He would talk for a while in Spanish, then he would perform a song. He would end every song by howling like a coyote. Then he would sit there doing nothing for about 5 minutes before he would attempt another song. Laurie and I were sitting outside the restaurant, but we could hear him, and we found ourselves laughing and imitating his coyote howl. Just between the two of us we were making fun of him because the whole thing seemed so ridiculous. After we finished our meal Laurie insisted she wanted to get a picture of Nacho. So we went over and asked if we could take his picture. That's when we learned he was blind. I realized I had been making fun of a blind old man. I didn't mock him publicly. I didn't do some awful thing to him. But I also clearly didn't have the attitude toward him that Jesus would have. I was not asking what response and attitude to Nacho God would want me to have.

Does God really have our heart? Are we asking him to change us from the inside out? Are we willing to live like Jesus, to have his same faithfulness, compassion and unconditional love as we deal with fallen people? Who do you think Jesus dealt with that did not fail to live up to the standards of what he might desire? No

one! Yet he still loved them. He loved the “sinners” like Zaccheus and Matthew who were the most hated people in their society and the prostitutes and fallen women like the one at the well in Samaria. He was loving and gentle toward his disciples when after teaching them for years about humility they were still arguing over who was the greatest the night he was arrested. Are we willing to let God have our hearts so we become like that?

ENLIST GOD IN *OUR* CAUSE

Verses 13-15 tell an unusual story. Joshua is near Jericho doing more reconnaissance when he encounters a man with a drawn sword. He evidently thought at first this individual was just another armed man. Being in enemy territory Joshua asks, “Friend or foe?” The man replies, “Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.”

Many scholars believe that this commander of the army of the Lord was actually God the Son appearing in human history before he came as Jesus in what we call the incarnation. Note that Joshua falls down before him, calls him Lord and says he is his servant. That seems to suggest he understood this was some manifestation of God himself. That is confirmed when the commander tells him the ground he is on is holy. It was holy because of the presence of the Lord.

What the Lord’s commander said is very strange. When Joshua asked whose side this divine messenger was on, Israel’s or the people of Jericho’s, he said “neither.” That’s weird, isn’t it? It is completely unexpected. Go back to Genesis 12 where God first called Abram. He promised him that he would bless him and his descendants and make a great nation of them, a nation that would be God’s people. In verse 3 God said, “I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse.” Doesn’t that sound like God would be on his side?

In Exodus 23:20-22 God promised Israel “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you.” He will be an enemy to Israel’s enemies! Doesn’t that sound like a promise to be on their side?

Romans 8:31 says, “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?” Doesn’t that say that God is for us? Doesn’t that mean that he is on our side? The second verse of the great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our*

God reads, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." See, even Martin Luther thought God is on our side.

Why did this person say that God is on neither side? We get that he was not on Jericho's side, but hadn't he promised to fight Israel's battles for them? If he did surely that meant he was on their side, didn't it? What then did he mean by saying he was on neither side?

Joshua responds well. He understands that this person must have shown up to tell him something, so he says, "what message does my Lord have for his servant?" The response adds to the curious nature of the conversation. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."

This is a passage my son takes literally. He seems to think it means he should always wear sandals and that when he leads worship in church he is on holy ground so he should remove them. In a previous ministry a person made an issue of the fact that Toby took his sandals off and I cited this incident and the one Moses had with the burning bush where the same thing happened. Then I said, "It seems biblical to me. In fact if we're going to take the Bible seriously it suggests that you are disobeying God. Maybe you ought to take your shoes off too." I wonder if that's why they decided to get rid of me.

The main point of this confrontation is that God is holy. He is not like us. He exists in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend. He knows the beginning from the end. He is unlimited. Because of these things he thinks and acts in ways that at times are mystifying to us. He just doesn't do things the way we would. His holy nature is what's behind his answer. God does not enlist in the plans and schemes of one party of humans against another. We humans are to line up with his plans and schemes. In other words, "Joshua, I'm not on your side or their side. But I invite you to be on my side."

This was the point at which Israel failed before. They thought they had the right to decide whether to obey God's instruction and enter Canaan or not. If they decided to go they would ask for his help. In taking that approach they were not regarding God as holy. They were saying, "We have the right to choose whatever we want to do. And we expect God to support our choices and help us in it."

The message here is that God doesn't enlist in our causes. We are to enlist in his. When he says "jump" we are to only ask, "how high?" This is a very different way

of thinking about how we relate to God and about what our lives are to be about. Joshua got the message. He took the sandals off his feet. Uh, okay, but so what? Why is that important?

Different cultures have different customs. For instance, the Germans have one called Polterabend. This is an informal party held before a wedding for the bride and groom to be. It is not a couple's shower. At the party the guests shatter dishes, tiles, vases, even toilets. The bride and groom are supposed to then clean up the mess. This supposedly symbolizes the couple working through future difficulties together. That's a little strange, but no more weird than the custom we have just experienced once again in our country. On Thursday there were bands of marauding children dressed up in costumes threatening extortion. Give me candy or you'll get some unpleasant trick played on you.

Our custom seems as weird to some cultures as Polterabend seems to us. I bring this up because the ancient culture of Israel had a custom about removing sandals. We are not certain what that meant, but here's what I think. Look at Ruth 3:7. "Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel." In other words, you signal your acceptance of a deal by taking off a sandal and handing it to the other party. That was like signing the contract in our culture. I believe when Joshua took off his sandals he was accepting the deal. He was accepting that God is holy and he was agreeing to enlist in God's holy cause, no matter what it might mean.

Joshua was saying yes to the fact that the Lord is holy and that Joshua and all Israel needed to bow before him. They needed to acknowledge that he is the holy Lord of all and that their responsibility is not to choose their own way and ask God to bless what they wanted, but it was to bow before him and to accept his absolute rule in all of their lives. This will become important in the next chapter because God is going to tell them to attack Jericho in a bizarre way. They were to attack by walking around the city every day for a week. It made no sense, but if God says do it, then they were to do it.

How does this relate to us? What it says to us is that we, like Joshua, to relate properly to God must regard him as holy. Among other things that means that we regard him as way smarter than we are, way more powerful and knowing than we are, that he is good in all he does and all he lets happen in our lives, and that we accept that because he is the holy God our role is to humble ourselves before him and accept with gratitude whatever he decides should happen. We accept that he in

his wisdom might order things in ways that we don't understand and may even not like, but that we accept it willingly and with an attitude of trust and thanksgiving, because he is the Holy One.

It is a constant temptation for people to think of God as a force that they need to enlist in their personal campaign. God warned Israel continually against idolatry. It started with the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:2-4 says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol." In verse 5 he said, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." Jeremiah 11:13 tells the sad story of Israel. "You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem."

Why was Israel so persistent in worshiping false gods when the command not to do so was so clear? It was because they had something they wanted. Usually it was riches, fertility and security. They looked around and saw other people worshiping gods like Baal and Molech and others and having what they wanted. So they decided they would add those gods in to their worship to cover their bets. Maybe those gods could give them something that Yahweh, the God of Israel either could not or would not.

They had a plan. They had something they wanted, and they were looking around for whatever edge they could get that might help them. If that meant worshiping a plethora of gods, so be it. This is not regarding God as holy. It is not seeing him as separate, as the one unique ruler of all.

We can fall into the same trap. We define the goal of our life, the ultimate good thing we must have as something other than knowing and worshiping God, then we try to enlist his assistance in giving us what we want. Be clear, worship is about declaring what is of utmost importance. When we declare something as more important than worshiping God, we are worshiping an idol. We are doing just what Israel did, and we are not taking our sandals off and accepting the deal with God to declare him holy.

There is a subtle thing that happens to us. It is not wrong to desire good things. Jesus told us to ask God to provide for us. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us to make our request in everything to God. It is not wrong to ask. It is right. The problem comes when we don't regard God as holy and we make that thing we ask for the most important thing.

We can know that we're falling into that trap when we don't get the thing we want. What is our attitude? Is it, God is holy and I enlist in his cause? Do we think that if his cause requires that I not have this thing then I not only accept not having it, I embrace it and give thanks to God? Do we make it our goal by our attitude to declare him holy. Or is our attitude, God keeps refusing to give me this so I'm not going to trust him anymore? Do we think, "I must have this thing so I'm going to do whatever is necessary to get it, and forget what God thinks"? When we hit that place we can know for a fact that we are only trying to enlist God's aid in getting what we really want.

Just this week I had a conversation with a husband whose wife has walked away from the marriage. He asked her if she is praying, if she is listening to God. She answered that she knows God is not happy with her choices. But she's sticking with them anyway. In other words, I know what God wants, but I have something I want and I'm going to have it even if he doesn't like it. That is not regarding God as holy. It is the opposite.

Sometimes you hear people say that if you have enough faith God will make you healthy and wealthy. What is wrong with being healthy and wealthy? Nothing. Those are good things. But the health and wealth guys you see on television make them the goal. They are not regarding God as holy, they are merely looking for ways to enlist him in their cause, which is to have the good life with a ton of money.

None of us keeps all God's commands perfectly. None of us regards God as holy without fail. The reason Jesus Christ came into this world and died on that cross is that we can't do those things perfectly. A talk like this is ripe with opportunity to pound on people and make them feel guilty for their shortcomings. Unfortunately the guy giving the talk falls as short as anyone. Do we fall short? You bet. A lot. All of us, which is why we rejoice in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. But as we are free in Christ we want to respond, to be more like God wants us, to be less phony. The focus then must be on our hearts, and the need there is in our hearts to be in awe of the holiness of God.

Isaiah 8:13 says "The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." A few weeks ago Laurie and I went with Michael, Carissa, Toby and Anna to a football game. After the game we were all hungry and decided we wanted to go to Chick-Fil-A. So at 9:30 or so we walked up to the restaurant. Outside there was a sort of street person looking individual sitting at a table with his dog lying next to him. This dog was enormous.

I didn't recognize what breed he was. As we neared it appeared to me he was looking at me with an expression on his face that seemed he was thinking, "Hmm, here comes dinner." I didn't want to get close to him, but I was intrigued by what kind of dog he was. I asked his owner, "What sort of breed is your dog?" He said, "He's a wolf." Well all right then. Later the guy walked into the restaurant with his wolf. We had a debate among ourselves over whether the animal was really a wolf and we concluded that he was a wolf dog. I looked at a website about wolf dogs and here's what it said about them. "Wolf dogs have the advantage of size, but are dangerous to be kept as pets due to their unpredictable behavior." In other words, they might decide on a whim if they are hungry to bite your leg off and eat it.

I had a healthy respect for that animal. He might *seem* safe, but he's never really tame. I believe there is a sense in which that's a bit like our holy God. He's not tame, and we need to have a healthy respect for him. We don't need to fear that he will be violent or untrustworthy. But he's not our pet. We used to coax our nice late dog Luke to do tricks for us. We could get him to stand on his hind legs and twirl or leap over barriers. We just had to use dog treats to motivate him. We are not regarding God as holy when we try to come up with treats for God to coax him to endorse our cause and do tricks for us. "Here God, I'll give you a little more money if you'll let me marry that person." "Hey God, give me this job and I'll pray and read the Bible every day." In some ways God is more like that wolf. He doesn't do tricks at our command. That's why C. S. Lewis chose the lion, Aslan, as a way to depict God in the Narnia books. You may remember the line, "Is he safe?" "Of course he's not safe. But he's good." Let's take off our sandals and realize in the presence of God we are on holy ground. Let's accept him for the holy God that he is and enlist in his cause as the entire plan for our lives.