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FILLING THE GAP
Joshua 24:14-15

It was March 23, 1775. Tension between the British colonies in America and Britain itself had been ratcheting up for several years and were now strained to the breaking point. British troops intent on squashing what was now an armed rebellion were arriving in the colonies. In effect war with the British had for all intents already begun in Massachusetts. In Virginia there was debate about how to respond. Should they try even harder to find some accommodation with the British or should they join the colonists to the north and take the fateful step of fighting the British? That day the House of Burgesses, Virginia's legislative body, met to decide what to do. According to biographer William Wirt finally Patrick Henry stood up and gave a speech. He spoke of the coming British army and navy. He talked about how the colonies had done everything possible to try to resolve the issues they had with the British. He said, "we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on." It had all been in vain. Nothing had worked, so, Henry claimed, "an appeal to arms and to the God of hosts is all that is left us." War was inevitable. Then he addressed the pleas of those who wanted to avoid war at all cost, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the cost of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

Persuaded by Henry's impassioned appeal the Burgesses voted to join the fight, and history was made. What a dramatic moment. What a stupendous impact that one man had on the history of the world by taking his stand, regardless of what others might think or do. Today we are going to look at another man who also made a stand. And we will learn that while we will surely not make an impact like the one Patrick Henry made, we too can and should follow the example of making a stand. We will see this in Joshua 24:14-15.

JOSHUA KNEW HE COULD NOT MAKE OTHERS CHOOSE WELL

This passage is the finale of the book of Joshua. Israel has routed the Canaanites and taken possession of the Promised Land. In the remaining chapters of the book you'll see the account of Israel defeating all of their enemies then dividing up the land and assigning it to families. So the people of Israel were now, at last, in their own land and Joshua was giving them a final challenge. In verse 14 he exhorted them to "fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness." He wanted them to get

rid of the false gods and idols that many of them had clung to. Unfortunately he knew well that he could not force the people to serve God.

In verse 15 he says, “but if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” That sounds like he is offering them another alternative. Hey, you can serve the Lord God or you can serve some other gods, but if you choose option B make sure you select the particular gods you are going to worship. Because after all, we all worship the same God, right? All roads lead to heaven, don’t they?

That was not what Joshua was saying. He was actually acknowledging the possibility that the people of Israel might worship false gods. There certainly was no shortage of phony gods to choose from, as pretty much all their contemporaries were polytheists. But Joshua’s point was to do what William Travis did according to legend at the Alamo. As Santa Anna’s troops surrounded the old mission and prepared for a final assault Travis gathered the few defenders of the Alamo in the courtyard. He explained the overwhelming odds and the likely outcome that any who stayed to fight would surely die. Then he drew a line in the dirt with his sword and said any who wished to stay should cross the line and stand with him. Joshua was drawing a line in the sand and challenging people to stand with him for the Lord. At the same time he highlighted what a foolish choice it would be for God’s chosen people to worship a bunch of divine wannabes.

The foolishness was obvious to anyone who listened to what he said before he got to this point. In the earlier verses in this chapter he had recited some of the familiar history of Israel. He reminded them how God called Abraham to Canaan, how he made a nation out of his descendants, how they were led out of slavery by Moses, how God parted the sea to rescue them, then how God gave them victory over their opponents in Canaan. He concluded in verse 13 pointing out how God “gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.” The implication is that if God has done all this for you why would you abandon him?

Nevertheless, despite all of that the Israelis had the option to desert the God who had done all of that for them in order to worship a bunch of fake gods. Such a choice would be beyond foolish and idiotic, yet they had that option available. Joshua knew Israel’s history. Sadly they had demonstrated a constant tendency to default to worshipping whatever the people around them worshiped. They were as vulnerable to peer pressure as anyone. Hey, if everyone around them thought those

gods were real and could help them they couldn't all be wrong, could they? So time and time again they would lapse into idol worship.

Psychologist Muzafer Sherif conducted a study in which he put people in a dark room and showed them a small point of light. Because of the way the human eye works the light appears to move. But individual subjects thought it move widely varying distances. Then they were retested in groups of three. But the researchers composed the groups in a specific way. They would put two people in the group whose initial estimates of movement were similar and one whose estimate was widely different. Each person in the group had to say aloud how far they thought the light moved. Consistently the subject whose opinion was initially different came to conform to the majority view. Maybe even more significant when they were interviewed afterward those whose opinion had changed now believed their initial estimate was wrong. Just being with people who had a different view caused them to change their opinion. That's an example of the power of the pressure that is exerted on us by what other people do and think. That's part of the reason why Israel was so swayed by the idol worship prevalent in their world.

We rarely consider how powerful the effect of other people is on us. We see it in young people, but it is everywhere around us. A while back I looked at some of our photo albums. One of them was the album from our honeymoon. I am embarrassed by the shorts that I wore back then. When our kids saw those pictures they just howled. Even I look at them and wonder, "What was I thinking? Why would I wear shorts that were that short? That's just wrong!" Well I wore them because that's what guys wore back then. Why do they look so dumb now? Only one reason. No guys wore shorts like that. We all wear much longer shorts and we would never think of wearing something like that. In other words, my opinion is formed by what everyone else does. Time and time again Israel had fallen prey to that same kind of influence and had worshiped the gods of the people groups around them.

In verse 16 the people of Israel all said, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!" In other words, "Oh, we will never do that." But look at Joshua's response in verse 19. "You are not able to serve the Lord." He knew they would do exactly what they said they never would. They would worship other gods. He'd seen how the majority idol worship that went on around them affected them. He was quite clear that worshiping God in this world is an uphill battle that they would not fight on a consistent basis.

This is a helpful reminder for us today. Have you ever noticed that if you are a committed follower of Jesus you are in the minority? You will be in the minority everywhere you go in this world except for the church. Most surveys come up with a figure of somewhere around 22 to 24% of Americans are evangelical Christians. However Dr. Christian Smith of Notre Dame, who has made a study of evangelical Christians, claims that the number who really live as evangelicals is about 7%. That means that for sure 3 out of 4 people you encounter do not see the world as God instructs us nor live in obedience to him. And that number could be as high as more than 9 out of 10. When you factor in that a large percentage of those who claim to be followers of Christ are in the south, the number here on the west coast probably is closer to 19 out of 20. You are a member of a minority, and not just barely a minority, but a small minority.

We are not going to be able to force others to make better choices and choose to know God and follow him. Joshua called on his people to obey God. We should do the same. But he understood the limits of that call. In the end they had a personal choice to make and he could not make it for them nor coerce them to make a good choice. We need to understand that our role in this world is to call people to know and follow the Lord Jesus Christ, but we must understand that only God can change their hearts. Only God can bring them to himself. But there is one other thing that we can do as Joshua shows us.

JOSHUA UNDERSTOOD THAT HE COULD BE AN EXAMPLE

What could Joshua do to influence the people of Israel to make good choices, which would lead to blessing, and avoid bad choices, which would inevitably lead to disaster? He could tell them the truth and urge them to make the right choice. But beyond that the best thing he could do was make a good choice himself and let them see his life. He could provide them an example.

The most compelling appeal we can make to others is the example of our own lives. Joshua understood that. We all know this is true. This is part of the reason Jesus lived on this planet. The main purpose of his coming was to make the sacrifice for us that was necessary to purchase our forgiveness and freedom. But he also gave us an example of what it means to live in the Spirit of God. He came to show us the life we can live. Romans 8:29 says God wants to conform us to the image of his Son. Jesus himself said the essence of real discipleship is "Follow me." Go with him, watch his life, learn and then live as he lived.

Paul understood the power of an example. In 1 Corinthians 4:16 he exhorted the Corinthians "I urge you to imitate me." In 1 Thessalonians 1:6 he commended the

Thessalonians because, “you became imitators of us.” In Philippians 3:15 he said his readers should take the same view, the same approach to life, that he had. In other words, he said, “Look at my example. Follow me.”

There’s a scene in the movie *Battle: Los Angeles*, that depicts the power of an example. That movie is another that features powerful aliens attacking earth and humans fighting back despite being badly outgunned. It focuses on a squad of Marines led by Sergeant Nantz that was sent to evacuate some civilians from a police station in Santa Monica before the whole area is bombed in an effort to destroy the alien forces. The team is attacked repeatedly in its effort to escape. Finally on the way out they discover the alien command center. Facing suicidal odds they come up with a way of destroying the key alien base. After the costly battle the battered Marines are evacuated to a base in the desert. An officer congratulates them on the victory because it gave people all over the world hope and a plan to defeat the enemy. He then tells them to go into a tent, get some breakfast and rest up. They go into the tent and the sergeant immediately begins loading up with ammo to go back to the fight as his marines watch him. An officer says, “What are you doing, Sergeant?” He says, “I already had breakfast, Sir.” One by one his marines begin to rearm in order to follow him back into the fight. The message was clear. He didn’t have to say a word. His example was all that was needed.

The first reaction one might have to that scene is that it is pure Hollywood fiction. However, that scene is paralleled by a real life incident that happened during the Battle of Mogadishu, known as the Black Hawk Down incident. A Delta Force soldier who had been in the fight and was part of the team that fought its way out of the city with the prisoners and wounded then did exactly what Sergeant Nantz did in the movie. Without being asked he rearmed and headed back into the fight to aid the soldiers who were still surrounded.

Everyone knows about the power of an example. An example can inspire us, challenge us and instruct us. You know how instructive an example can be. Do you remember when you were taking those hated math classes in school and the math book would explain a concept but you didn’t really get it? Then they would give you a sample problem, an example, and you would see how the concept worked. “Oh, I see, that’s what I’m supposed to do.” The only fly in that ointment was that the problems on the test never were like the example.

I related to Laurie a funny thing I realized recently. I was watching a hockey game on television and I suddenly became aware that I was watching one particular

player. It is an old habit that I have had unconsciously for years. I pick out a player to watch how he plays his position. What is funny about this is that I started doing that years ago to learn. I never had any coaching in hockey, so the way I learned how to play was by watching the examples of others. So to this day, though I had not been aware of it, I still do that to pick up tips to improve my game. That's just dumb because I haven't played hockey for years, and I never will again. So why should I care about improving my game since it doesn't exist? The point here is that we can learn from the example. Joshua wanted to demonstrate to people how they should live, and the best way he could do that is by example.

An example can also inspire us. I was riding the exercise bike recently, making at least some effort to get in some semblance of decent shape. I was watching television while doing it and a show came on the TV about some athletes training. These were superb athletes and they were working out harder than I have ever worked in my life. They looked great. I suddenly found myself working harder on that bike. Without even making a conscious decision I was being pulled into greater effort simply by the example of others. Their good example was inspiring me to go beyond what I typically would do.

Of course we can also be challenged by an example. Maybe you saw in the newspaper on Tuesday this week (December 10, 2013) the story about Clay Treska. He is a former Marine who has been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. That means it is terminal. Here's how the article described him. "These days, Clay Treska smiles often and has a sparkle in his eyes. In conversations, he'll talk about how blessed he is, how grateful he is and how much he wants to help others. His followers and friends on Twitter and Facebook see a stream of positive messages. Among his recent posts, 'Having one of those I'm so incredibly blessed I'm overcome with emotion moments.' 'Today is a GREAT day.'" His example caused me to ask myself, "What do you have to complain about?" No matter what I may have to deal with in life, it pales beside cancer. The example made me want to have a more joyful response to events in my life.

An example has such power. Joshua drew a line in the sand. He said, "I don't know what you're going to do, but I am going to serve the Lord." He invited all Israel to observe him and challenged them to follow his example. It was the most powerful thing he could do.

I have shared this before, but I recall when I was in my teen years getting up in the morning and seeing my father on his knees praying. He had been up long before I got up, reading his Bible and praying. He could have lectured me until he was blue

in the face about the importance of knowing Christ and obeying him and it might have had some effect. But it never would have had the effect of seeing his life, seeing that Christ was real to him, that he loved him and gave of himself to serve Christ.

APPLICATION

GOD WANTS US TO BE EXAMPLES

In Ezekiel 22 the prophet says the word of the Lord came to him and recited the state of the people of Israel. According to verses 23 and 27 the political leaders of the nation were like animals tearing their prey. Verse 27 says “they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.” Verse 26 says, “her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things.” Verse 28 says the supposed prophets whitewashed the atrocities of the leaders with false visions. Verse 29 says, “The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.” In verse 30 God says, “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.” God pictured obedience to him being like a wall that would surround a city and protect the people. That wall in Israel was in terrible shape with gaps in it wide enough to drive a tank through. God sought someone, anyone, who would stand in the gap between what his people were called to be and what they were. He came up empty. God is still looking for people to stand in the gap. At every point in history God has been looking for people to stand in the gap. In various times there have been some who have answered the call.

It occurred to me recently that if you watch a football game on TV these days you will hear some rather arcane terminology being thrown about rather liberally. You’ll hear about zone blitzes, cover 2, Tampa 2, read option, spread, up tempo offense, nickel package, dime package, 3 technique, a gunner, slant and go and many more. You will likely hear talk about gaps and gap responsibility. What that means is that an offensive line will consist usually of 5 or 6 men. Between them are gaps. On running plays the running back will try to go through one of those gaps. Defensive players are assigned responsibility to cover particular gaps. Defensive linemen are assigned to clog up certain gaps and occupy blockers. It is the job of the linebacker then to read where the ball carrier is going to go, then to step into that gap and stop him. That may mean standing there, taking on a 240 pound fullback coming at you like a freight train, standing up to him, shedding him then colliding with a powerful 220 pound running back coming through at full speed. Fill the gap. Stand in that gap and do what needs to be done, whatever it

takes. That's what Ezekiel said God is looking for – some spiritual linebackers to fill the gap and make the courageous stand.

In Daniel 3 there is the familiar story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These three were some of the Jews who were forcibly taken from their homes to live in Babylon. They rose to positions of respect in the government there but there came a time when King Nebuchadnezzar pressured them to worship at an enormous idol. When they refused he threatened to execute them by throwing them into a blast furnace. In verses 17-18 they responded, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O King. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." Like Joshua, they said, "whatever you do, as for us, we will serve the Lord." They stood in the gap.

In Acts 4:18 Peter and John were on trial before the leaders of Israel who "commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." In verses 19-20 they answered, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." They stood in the gap too.

In Acts 21 Paul was on his way to Jerusalem to deliver a gift of financial assistance from Gentile churches to the Jewish Christians who were suffering severely. On the way people kept urging Paul not to go on. In verse 11 a prophet told Paul if he went to Jerusalem he would be arrested and turned over to Roman authorities. Everyone begged Paul not to go. In verse 13 Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." He was going to serve God regardless of the cost.

We cannot force people to serve the Lord. We cannot make their decisions for them. The large majority of people you encounter in the world will not have as the goal of their lives serving God. So what can we do? We can draw that line in the sand. We can stand up with Joshua and say, "I will serve the Lord." We can choose for ourselves that whatever other people may do, we will serve the Lord. That will be what our entire lives are to be about. The ultimate question for us at every moment will not be "what's in it for me?" but "what will serve the Lord?"

WE ARE TO BE AN EXAMPLE OF TRUE WORSHIP

Joshua talked about serving God. That was another way of saying he would only worship God. When you worship someone you serve that person. You live to do

whatever God commands. What God commands is that he would own our heart. The first of the commandments is “You shall have no other gods before me” in Exodus 20:3. God does not want to share his place in our hearts with anyone or anything else.

In Deuteronomy 6:5 it is expressed this way, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” That means what we are doing is not living by a set of rules, a list of do’s and don’ts. Doctrine is important, but serving God does not first mean adhering to a set of doctrines.

It is to put him first in our hearts in everything. It is to be so struck in wonder at God’s greatness, his goodness and his love for us, so overwhelmed by his grace than we want nothing more than to be and to do whatever will honor him. We will want most of all to be with him and to please him. It means to be horrified at the thought of ever doing anything that would displease him or reflect badly on him.

Kyle Idleman is the teaching pastor of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He has written a book entitled *Not A Fan*. The premise of the book is that in this country there are lots of fans of Jesus. There are lots of people who admire Jesus. But there is a difference between being a fan of Jesus and being a follower.

Idleman tells a story that at his church they got a message from a person who said that he no longer wished to be part of the church. The reason, he said, was that he didn’t like Kyle Idleman’s sermons. Kyle decided he should find out what it was that the person didn’t like, so he got a phone number and called the individual. When the guy answered he said, “Hi, this is Kyle Idleman, and I understand you’re leaving the church because you don’t like my sermons. Could you tell me why you don’t like them? What bothers you about them?” The fellow stammered a bit, but then they began a conversation. He finally said what was really the core of the problem. He said, “I feel like you’re trying to interfere with my life.” In other words, he wanted to admire Jesus and have some religion in his life, but he didn’t want Jesus to cramp his style. If we are really going to serve God it is going to mean being a follower, not a fan.

Maybe you saw the interview with Philip Rivers on the NFL Network following the Chargers victory over Denver Thursday night. It was a terrific interview. He won a lot of fans with it that night. I am a fan of Philip Rivers. But I’m not a *follower* of Philip Rivers. I don’t want to follow his example. He has 7 kids, and I don’t want that. What Rivers thinks and chooses to do does not determine how I

will think and act. But if I serve God, if I am a follower of Jesus, what he thinks is all that really matters. What others think, how comfortable I am, how easy my life is do not matter. What God wants is all that matters.

Living for God is not to be drudgery. I like the way author and former pastor John Piper put it. He said we are to submit to God in a way that makes him look thrilling. If we truly love God it will not be onerous to let him rule in our daily lives. It may be hard at times but it won't be drudgery. It is no secret to any of you that I love Laurie. She brings more joy to me than I can ever express. I am serious when I say I am more blessed than anyone I know because of her. As you all know she had some surgery a couple of months back. This was obviously difficult for her, but it was kind of hard on me, too. Laurie is so healthy and strong I just am used to her always being there functioning with her usual great spirit. It was unsettling to be reminded that she too is human and is not indestructible.

But of course being laid out by surgery meant that she could not do all the things she normally does. She couldn't cook the meals, she couldn't shop for food, she couldn't go out much. She was in some pain and she was weak and tired. So I had to pick up the slack. I had to see to her needs, make sure she was taken care of, go out and shop for food, prepare meals, wash up after meals. It was a lot of work. There was never a moment when it felt like drudgery. It was a little tiring at times, but it was a joy to do it because Laurie is worth far more than the little trifling tasks I did to serve her. And so it is to be for us as we worship and serve God. He is so good. We are so blessed to know him and have been given so much, that to honor and serve him in every moment is a privilege and joy.

Life is hard. All of us will experience disappointment, obstacles, hardships and losses. Around you in the struggle and pain of this life are followers of Jesus who need encouragement and hope. God wants you to be an example to them that will inspire them, challenge them, and show them the way. You can give them hope and strength and even comfort by living out "as for me, I will serve the Lord." The world around us is desperate for this. People appear on the outside to be just fine, but those appearances can be deceiving. People are struggling to find something they know is missing in their lives. They don't have peace, they want joy but don't have it consistently. They are full of anxiety, desperate for meaning and they long of love. They struggle and mostly fail to successfully manage relationships and marriage and in the face of death they have no hope at all. They need someone to show them the way.

There was another article in the newspaper on Tuesday this week. It was about Marine Major Robb McDonald being awarded a silver star. On the night of September 14, 2012 Taliban insurgents wearing U.S. Army uniforms infiltrated Camp Bastion, part of the Camp Leatherneck complex in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The Taliban attacked the flight line of the air base, destroying 6 Harrier jets and damaging a number of other aircraft. A group of Marines from an aviation squadron were pinned down in an aluminum building that offered no real protection and was indefensible. Though Marines, they were not infantry guys. They didn't know how to handle a firefight. Major McDonald was the executive officer of the Harrier squadron but was formerly a Force Recon Marine. He dashed a mile while exposed to fire to get to the site. One Marine said, "When he showed up and took action you could see a lot of Marines breathe a sigh of relief." The opening paragraph of the story about the attack said, "When Major Robb McDonald arrived at the Camp Bastion attack, some of the Marines under fire allowed themselves to exhale." God wants us to be people who, like the Major, bring a sigh of relief to others. We are to be people who bring hope and life, for we bring absolute trust and the presence of God to every situation. We are to say, "I don't know about you, but I'm drawing a line in the sand. I will serve the Lord." We are to provide the instruction, the inspiration, the challenge that an example inevitably gives. Everywhere in this world, in every family, school, neighborhood, business, team, and church a gap exists. We are to fill that gap!