

Sermon on **Joshua 24:14-24** for “A Time for Everything: Prioritize.”

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It’s a No-Brainer!

“Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” (*Colossians 2:6-7*)

I have a tough choice to make. It’s a choice that I’ve been wrestling with for a little while now. I think I can see the pros and cons of both sides of it. I don’t have forever to make this choice because time is going to run out. Here’s the choice I have to make: I’m trying to decide between eating or not eating ever again. (Did you think I was going to say something else?) And you are probably looking at me and saying, “*Are you crazy? That’s not a choice at all! That’s a no-brainer.*”

It’s exactly the type of choice Joshua lays before the people of Israel as they now stood in the Promised Land God had been promising to give them for hundreds of years. He said, “***Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.***”

Some Christians make a lot of the word “choose” saying, “*See, faith is a choice that you have to make – you have to choose to believe in Jesus.*” Is that what Joshua is doing here? Asking unbelievers to choose to believe? Not at all! He’s speaking to believers who already have been given the gift of faith that only comes by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, and not by our choice. The Bible says that as unbelievers we were spiritually dead (Ephesians 2, 1 Corinthians 2). Asking an unbeliever to “make your choice or decision” would be like waving a \$50 bill over a dead person and telling them, “*It’s all yours – all you have to do is choose to grab it.*” You’ll end up waiting a long time! Joshua is talking to God’s children, Israel, and he’s telling *living* believers to make an all-or-nothing choice. In other words, this is not an evangelism sermon – this is a confirmation sermon.

Joshua says that if you’re not going to fear the LORD then you need to choose between any number of manure pile deities. To put it another way, Joshua says, “*Eat food. But if you won’t eat food then choose between eating rocks or dirt because at some point you have to eat something.*” He’s not giving them viable alternatives to following the true God, because there aren’t any! He’s just trying to point out a double-mindedness or an inconsistency that too many of them had held to – the thinking: “*I can follow the one and only true God of Israel and I can worship these other gods that help me in my life whether it’s sacrificing to the idol that will help with fertility or the idol that will help with crops or the idol that will make it rain.*” Joshua is trying to shock them with the absurd to show them, “*No! It doesn’t work that way! This is a no-brainer choice!*”

But consistency is not something we are very good at in our country. Think of how many people will say the “Pledge of Allegiance” who don’t follow what they confess. *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United of America and to the Republic for which it stands...and yet how many millions will cheat on their taxes in the coming months...one nation, under God...and yet how many deny God’s existence...with liberty and justice for all...and yet 50 million babies have been legally killed in our country before getting to see the light of day.*

But it’s not just the people out there that are inconsistent, is it? Many of us made the promise to follow Jesus in this life no matter what at our confirmations, to follow him alone, and to put our trust in no other god. How have we done? Joshua told the people to throw away all of the other gods in their tents, the gods their forefathers worshipped alongside of the true God. What are the gods of your fathers that have found a home in your tent?

Maybe your dad abused alcohol growing up, and you use that as an excuse to do the same, holding onto that empty god which promises everything and gives you nothing but a headache and poor decisions. You can’t serve both God and alcohol. Maybe your dad was always at work and didn’t have time for you as a kid, and you use that as an excuse to keep that empty god of work-holism and neglect in your own life. That god promises success, but only leaves you fatigued. You can’t serve both God and work. Maybe your mother was rude to your father growing up, and you use that as an excuse to hold to that empty god of mistreating people in your life. That god promises you the good feeling of superiority but only leaves you with guilt and broken relationships. You can’t serve both God and self. Is your god failing to prioritize the true God by saying how busy you are? Is your god greed? You can’t serve both God and money. What are the idols in your tent?

Choose! Choose to follow the true God! Or choose to follow empty gods that Satan uses to lead souls to hell. As Christians, I believe that everyone here today would say with the Israelites: ***“Far be it from us to forsake the LORD and serve other gods!...we will serve the LORD because he is our God!”***

And you might expect Joshua to have been elated, but instead, he responded to that confession what we need to hear today as well: ***“You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve other gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you!”*** Joshua knows them! He knows that they have big talk and small walk. Joshua is saying, *“Don’t lightly mouth your profession of faith. Don’t you know what kind of God you are dealing with? He is a holy, jealous God! You don’t dare come to him thinking, ‘though it makes him sad to see the way we live, he’ll always say, ‘I forgive.’”* Our God is not a soft cuddly Santa in the sky who drools over easy lip service. He is not a God who is pleased with our strongly worded confirmation vows when they are followed by weakly lived lives. You have to be all in!

I’m sure you’ve heard the hog and hen story. Both hog and hen were walking past a church and noted the pastor’s sermon title on the outside bulletin board. It read: *“What can we do to help the poor?”* As hogs and hens are wont to do, they entered into earnest conversation over the question as they continued on their way. At last, the hen had a bright idea: *“I’ve got it!”* She cackled, *“We can help the poor by giving them a ham and eggs breakfast!”* *“Oh, no you don’t,”* shot back the hog, *“for you, that only means a contribution, but for me, it means total commitment.”* The hog was right. That is Joshua’s point – there can be no chicken’s way out; we must go “whole hog” for Jesus.

So the question is not will you say you will only follow God and that you will put away the gods in your life. But are you willing to do it? What’s your choice? To say it makes it a no-brainer. To actually do it makes it a little tougher. It’s strange to say, but it is *really* hard to put away the idols we just talked about because those idols promise instant satisfaction (and never deliver) and our God seems so slow sometimes in keeping his promises. But Joshua says, ***“Choose!”*** Before you respond to Joshua’s challenge, it might be good for us to think about what Joshua started this whole discourse with before the verses of our text. He showed them who this God is.

He starts 600 years before and reminds them of their forefather, Abraham. He reminded them that he took Abraham and literally, *multiplied his descendants*. Do you remember the story of Abraham? He gave him Isaac. Let’s do some multiplication – $1 \times 1 = 1$. And according to the mathematics of Genesis, it took 25 years just to get Isaac! But God goes on, *and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau*. That’s not much better. The LORD multiplies Abraham’s seed by giving him 2 grandsons! And that was after 20 years of childlessness for Isaac and Rebekah! Do you see my point? God does not appear to be in a hurry; he is not driven by the calendar or intimidated by the clock. The LORD kept his promise, (the great nation of Israel was proof!) but he did it slowly. Our God always does what he promises, sometimes so gradually that we don’t see his faithfulness. It is the only way because it is God’s way. *Every other God in your life offers instant gratification but in the long run never delivers.* I want to repeat that: *Every other God in your life offers instant gratification but in the long run never delivers.* Name one that ever has! Joshua goes on to talk about how God saved them from slavery, defeated every enemy and brought them to the land he had promised Abraham, yes, 600 years before! In spite of the divided and inconsistent hearts of the Israelites, God’s heart was never divided to save them.

And God does not change. There Jesus was in the throne room of heaven enjoying eternity in perfect glory and he had a choice to make: Do I stay here in the painless perfection of heaven or do I go to earth and endure eternal pain? And we’re thinking, *“That’s a no-brainer! Why would anyone choose pain?”* And Jesus would agree – it was a no-brainer. He loved you there and so he came here. With undivided heart, he served his Father in heaven for all the times our hearts are divided. With consistent determination, Jesus marched to his death on the cross so that your life would start in heaven. He rose and now lives to bless you as you serve him. His heart is still not divided, and neither is his attention when it comes to you. Think of that. When you sit down and read or listen to his Word and call out to him in prayer, because Jesus is not divided, you have more of his attention than he has of yours. At that moment, he has nothing better to do. This is your God. He is whole hog for you.

Looking at all of that, Joshua made his pledge of allegiance, ***“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*** Make it yours, too. This week, do some soul searching about the idols that you have allowed to stay in your tent and choose to throw them out and only serve the LORD. And that is going to be really hard. Just remember you have a God more worthy of your heart. The apostle Paul said, ***“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God...and he tried to stop there, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t help himself; he just had to add, who loved me and gave himself up for me.”*** So, people of God, choose this day whom you will serve. It’s time to prioritize. Refrain from false gods. Embrace the true God. It’s a no-brainer. ***As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*** Amen.