

“Passing the Torch of Spiritual Leadership”
Joshua 23:1-11
Commencement Address
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INTRODUCTION: President Harvey Ching, members of the board, fellow faculty members and staff, alumni, families, friends and graduates of the class of 1999.

This morning I would like you to go back with me to another commencement day—to the day in the life of the nation of Israel when Joshua passed the torch of leadership to a new generation. Joshua’s final charge to that new generation of leaders is found in Joshua 23. Joshua knew that he would soon pass from the scene, and he was concerned for the new leaders that God would raise up to follow him. His words to them that day apply to each one of us today who desires to be the kind of leader God wants us to be. This passage is a reminder to us of what God cares about in ministry leadership.

In these verses I want to focus on four principles of successful spiritual leadership:

Give God all the credit
Obey his Word completely
Cleave to him only
Love him more than anything else

The first principle is: **If you want to be successful in ministry...**

1. GIVE GOD ALL THE CREDIT

This principle is found in verse 3: “...*You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the LORD your God who fought for you.*”

The thing that impresses me throughout the book of Joshua is that Joshua was a man of tremendous humility. He was a leader who did not draw attention to himself. Joshua constantly centered the attention of the people on the CHARACTER of God, rather than his own personal CHARISMA. The important thing for Joshua was what God had done and what God could be trusted for, not what Joshua did. Joshua gave all his successes back to God as His accomplishments.

Billy Graham is a man that I respect. Like Joshua, he has spent a lifetime giving God all the credit. After 50 years of public life and ministry, even the secular press respects him. I don’t think he is respected because he is a brilliant speaker and evangelist, or because he is an obvious leader, or because he has had great success in the growth of his organization. All those things are true. But what I respond to in Billy Graham and what even nonbelievers respond to is his integrity and his humility more than anything else. He doesn’t draw attention to himself. Billy Graham is someone who for fifty years has given success in ministry back to the Lord and has acknowledged his TOTAL DEPENDENCE on God for effectiveness.

We need to learn this same lesson. It is often easy to begin our Christian lives giving God the credit. But as we grow older and as our accomplishments increase, our tendency is to forget the source of our strength, our abilities, and our achievements. But if we are putting God first we will always reflect with humility that it is God who is responsible for all we are and have.

Let me mention something else that is very important: When you give all your successes back to God as His accomplishments—then you don't have to be depressed and discouraged over the opinions and criticisms of other people. When you give all your successes back to God as His accomplishments through you, you are free from being demoralized by any superficial evaluation of failure in your ministry. Because you were not doing it to seek credit for yourself. You were doing it for the glory of God. Since it was all for Him and for His glory, the only judgement and opinion of your ministry that ultimately matters is the judgement and estimate and opinion of the Lord himself.

The SECOND PRINCIPLE is found in verse 6. ***“Be very strong; be careful to OBEY all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.”***

If you want to be successful in ministry...

2. OBEY GOD'S WORD COMPLETELY

In chapter 1 God commanded Joshua: ***“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful”*** (Joshua 1:8). This became uppermost in Joshua's life. He committed himself to a life of obedience to the Law of God. Now he urges this same commitment on a new generation of leaders in verse 6: ***“Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.”***

Let me give you a little QUIZ this morning. *What is it that most honors God and which God most delights to honor?* Is God most honored by an eloquent profession of faith? No. Many have called Jesus “Lord, Lord” but have later fallen away and stopped serving him. Is God most honored by great natural abilities or talents? No. There are many who have had great abilities and talents but have wasted them on worthless goals. Is God most honored by an attractive appearance or a winsome personality? No. Saul stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. He seemed to have everything going for him. He was called by God, gifted by God, and anointed by God. But he failed miserably.

The true answer to the question “What most honors God and what does God most delight to honor is found in Samuel's words to Saul after Saul had sinned: ***“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams”*** (I Samuel 15:22). That's the answer. The thing that most honors God and that God most delights to honor is OBEDIENCE.

If you want to be successful in ministry, immerse yourself in the Word of God, and live in uncompromising OBEDIENCE to it. Then you will experience God's power and blessing on your life and ministry. There is no substitute for OBEDIENCE.

The THIRD key to spiritual success is found in verse 8...

3. CLEAVE TO THE LORD ONLY

“Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to CLEAVE to the LORD your God, as you have until now” (vv. 7-8). The term “CLEAVE” means to hang on tight, to stick like glue. The same word is used in Genesis 1 about the exclusive relationship between a husband and wife. Here we are called to trust God and not to trust any other resources but God.

Just as Israel had to constantly contend with the influence of the Canaanites and their gods, we also have many other philosophies of success in the world competing for our attention and trying to seduce us with false promises. There are many temptations, even when we're trying to do the Lord's work, not to rely on the Lord. There will be temptations to water down His word, to give up because of discouragement, or to pursue methods that are not pleasing to Him. But Joshua calls us to hold fast to the Lord. The promise is that as long as we are cleaving to the Lord in willing, practical obedience, God will honor what we do. This is true of an institution as well as an individual.

The FOURTH principle is found in verses 9-11: ***“The LORD has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the LORD your God.”***

The final principle of spiritual success found in these verses is:

4. LOVE GOD MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

This is an intense call to self examination: Do I really love God more than anything? Do I love him more than my ministry or the people in my ministry?

One of our International graduates recently returned to Hawaii after 12 years on the mission field in Europe, and he is here this morning—Dave Olander. Dave shared with me that just before he left for the mission field, he heard Mrs. Cam Townsend speak at a missions conference (Cam Townsend was the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators). Mrs. Townsend made a statement that seemed to Dave at the time very simplistic: ***“Never love the people more than you love the Lord.”***

That statement seemed simplistic at the time, but it stuck in his mind. He didn't appreciate her words till many years later. He said he often heard people say that to be effective as a missionary you must love the people God has called you to serve. But over the years he met many missionaries who left the field because they had become bitter and disillusioned and resentful toward the people they were supposed to be reaching. Then he realized the significance of Mrs. Townsend's statement: If we are going to last in ministry, we must love the Lord more than anyone or anything else. If we are serving for any lesser motive, we will eventually burn out. Our motive must be preeminently a love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15-19.) Everything depends on that. As we grow more deeply in love with the Lord Jesus, everything else in our ministry will find its proper place. Relationships will work the way they're supposed to work. Loving him with all our hearts will result in spiritual success in the things that really matter from God's perspective.

CONCLUSION

So let me leave you today with the same charge that Joshua gave to the new generation of leaders in Israel. If you want to be successful in ministry, it is laid out in this passage: Give God all the credit—give all your successes back to God as His accomplishments; submit yourself to His Word; stick to Him like glue in willing, practical obedience; and love him with everything you've got. As you do this you will find that God will do wonderful things in and through your life.

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