

"Faithfulness in Little Things"

Many of us have heard about some of the crazy demands made by music celebrities in their concert contracts. One of the most notorious came from the band, Van Halen. It was reported that each contract required "a bowl of M&M's be provided backstage, with all the brown M&Ms removed." If the band arrived and the bowl had any brown M&Ms, they were free to cancel the concert and receive full payment. Who knew your favorite party band could be such divas?

It turns out there was more to the story. In the book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, author and Physician Atul Gawande, shares the story behind the M&Ms. It turns out Van Halen was the first band to take huge productions into third-level markets. They would pull up with nine 18-wheeler trucks, full of gear, where the standard was three trucks, max. And there were many, many technical errors—whether it was the girders couldn't support the weight, or the flooring would sink in, or the doors weren't big enough to move the gear through. The contract rider read like a phone book because there was so much equipment, and so many people to make it function." So just buried somewhere in the middle of the contract, would be Article 126, the no-brown-M&Ms clause. It was a test – a safety test. When the band would walk backstage, if they saw a brown M&M in that bowl, they knew someone wasn't attending to the details. They would have to line-check everything else in the entire production, and it would be almost guaranteed that they would run into other issues that had been overlooked. The mistakes could be life-threatening. In Colorado, the band found the local promoters failed to read the weight requirements and that the staging would have fallen through the arena floor.

It's funny a seemingly odd contract demand can illustrate a Biblical principle. In **Luke 16:10**, Jesus said the one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much. I've heard the famous Christian missionary to China, Hudson Taylor put it this way, "*A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.*" It is Father's Day weekend, and we value the fathers among us and want to pray for and support them. They do a lot of little things that make a huge difference. But this not primarily a Father's Day message. We're on a schedule for this series: *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life*. This summer's theme, *The Struggle for Courage* in Joshua and Judges applies to fathers as it does to us all.

This particular message this weekend is a little different though because it is also influenced by our beach baptism plans for July. Whenever we plan for a beach baptism, we try to do a message that relates to baptism. Some people think of baptism as a little thing one small item on a checklist. We want to encourage people to consider that faithfulness in baptism might be more significant than they imagine.

Last week we looked at **Joshua 1** and God's words for spiritual warriors. In this message, we're going to look at a story from **Joshua 5** about the neglected ritual of circumcision. We're going to look at this in light of a passage from the New Testament book of **Colossians** that links circumcision to baptism. The best way to do this is to start with the New Testament teaching and then look Old Testament lesson.

*There are a lot of important themes threaded through the passage we read from **Colossians 2:11-14**. What is the point of it all? It talks about Christ, circumcision, baptism, resurrection, forgiveness, and faith. It says all of these things are connected to each other. The point that is made in all of this is that...*

I. WATER BAPTISM MAY SEEM LIKE A SMALL THING TO SOME, BUT IT IS A SYMBOL OF SOMETHING HUGE IN CHRIST.

This verse can be a little overwhelming. What is clear is this:

A. God has done wonderful things for us through Jesus.

Colossians 2 uses two powerful images or pictures to teach this.

1st. You were dead, but you've been made alive. Look at **verse 13** *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses. You were dead in your trespasses. A trespass is crossing a boundary that God has drawn. So you were spiritually dead, but God made you alive. To come alive to God is the spiritual rebirth Jesus said must experience to enter the Kingdom of God.*

2nd. You were condemned by your debt, but you have been forgiven in Christ. At the end of **verse 13**, *God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses. God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses. Then verse 14 continues. ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

Picture “*your record of debt*” everything you have done wrong, the shame, the things that weigh on your heart and condemn you before God nailed to the cross. Jesus paid it all. You are forgiven all of it.

Two powerful images. One about the spiritual state of your heart, and the other is about your spiritual status before God. And then he talks about two symbolic acts: circumcision and baptism.

B. circumcision and baptism were given by God picture these gifts of grace.

1. Verse 11 talks about circumcision. It says, *In him* (that means in union with Christ because you have trusted in him) *also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.* What he’s saying is there is the outward act or ritual definitely done with hands. Then there is the inward spiritual reality, which is a work of God. If you belong to Jesus, you have the reality of which circumcision was the symbol.

The Jewish people practiced circumcision before the time of Jesus. There was a man in the book of Genesis named Abraham. God said he would make him a great nation, give him a promised land, and use him to bless the whole world. God made a covenant with him and said the sign of the covenant for you and your descendants will be circumcision.

Picture Abraham stepping into the lamp lit tent after talking with God and announcing this to his extended family. *“Hey Everybody, God gave us a sign to mark us as his very own.”* Everybody nods and thinks, *“cool!”* So Abraham has to say, *“Well first of all ladies, this one isn’t for you. You’re every bit as important to God as the guys, but Yahweh says this one is only for the male folk. He wants them to step up and lead, and I’m not sure you will mind that when I tell you what it is.”* So he explains, *“We’re going to make these stone knives out of flint and then we’re just going to cut around in a circle a little part of you that you don’t really need.”* I can imagine the guys reacting. *“Could we all wear a special hairstyle instead? The Sikhs don’t cut their hair. They wear turbans. The Samoans get tattooed. Could we do something more along those lines? Why this?”*

What later Scriptures made clear was that physical circumcision was a symbol of purity. The flesh is often a symbol of sin and temptation. To cut an intimate part of it off and discard, it was a symbolic way of setting aside the flesh to live by the life of the Spirit.

In the books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah God speaks to both men and women about the need to circumcise, to cut around the heart, to set aside the heart of flesh to live with a God-centered spiritual focus in life.¹ Colossians is written to non-Jewish Christians telling them and you, that because you have Christ, you already have the inward spiritual reality of which circumcision is an outward physical symbol.

2. Verse 12 connects this all to baptism. Beginning with the last phrase of **verse 11**, He says they have *the circumcision of Christ having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead*. Baptism is the new sign and seal of grace – the sacrament of Christ the symbol of dying to the old self and rising up to live a new life in Christ.

The last thing that he says is that it is faith that makes it meaningful. **Verse 12** again. *Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead*. Those words “through faith” are essential. The Bible tells us that faith in Christ is the *essential thing* baptism is the *external expression* of it. The Scriptures make this point something like 150 times in the New Testament alone. No ritual makes you right with God. There are no works you can do that make you right with God. We have to give that up and come to Christ with a childlike faith that relies on him alone to be our Savior. The moment you do that your sins are nailed to the cross. You are forgiven everything. The Spirit of God imparts a new birth, a new life.

Sometimes we ask the wrong questions. Sometimes people ask me: "To be a Christian, do I have to be baptized?" That's the wrong question. It's like a man asking a woman, "To marry you do, I *have to* buy a ring on my finger?" Legally the answer is *no*. The ring is not the *essential* thing. But if you claim to love that woman and want to be married to her, why wouldn't you place that ring on her finger as a symbol of your love and commitment? Baptism is the expression of faith in, love for, and commitment to Jesus that was chosen and commanded by Jesus. It is a picture of the spiritual transformation, we receive from God by his grace. Baptism is the outward physical sign and seal of an inward spiritual gift of grace. It's not a small thing. Jesus calls for it. He commands it in the Great Commission. Over and over in the New Testament, you read where men and women believed in Jesus and then were baptized (Acts 2:41, 8:12). If your faith is in

Jesus as your Savior, you should be baptized as an expression of your faith.

*This brings us, very briefly to **Joshua 5**. It uses a story about circumcision, the Old Testament Sacrament to teach us that...*

II. SOMETIMES THINGS THAT MAY SEEM SMALL TO US PROVE TO BE VERY IMPORTANT TO GOD.

When the descendants of Abraham were delivered from slavery in Egypt, the men were circumcised. That generation came to the edge of the Promised Land but failed to enter. They didn't trust or obey God, so they wandered for forty years in the desert. That whole generation died off. Now, there's a new generation, and it turns out they have not been circumcised. It was low on their priorities. Suddenly God insists on it. **Verse 5** says, *at that time, the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time."* Here's a story about something that has been neglected. You have to wonder if it was neglected because it wasn't considered that important and it definitely wasn't convenient. But it turns out it mattered a lot to God.

It seems a pretty clearly principle in the Bible that we are on dangerous ground whenever we think we can be selective in our obedience to God. It's arrogant and foolish to think we can decide what matters and what doesn't, what's important and what isn't. Faithfulness in what may seem to you to be a small thing is actually a big thing with God.

A. Sometimes God tells us to do things we may not understand.

At this point in the story of Joshua, they have crossed the Jordan river. Now they are on the enemies side of the river. God had just told them they were going to face intense conflict and needed to be strong and courageous. Their enemies are temporarily demoralized by their miraculous crossing of the Jordan River. This would seem like the moment to go on the offensive. Instead makes them stop to make sure all the fighting men have a somewhat delicate operation performed on them with stone knives! You've got to be kidding!

Maybe it wouldn't be a big deal for a newborn, but these are adult men. **Verse 8** makes the point that the whole army was disabled for several days. There was a story from earlier in the Bible when two of Jacob's sons wiped out all the men in the town of Shechem by convincing them to be circumcised and then attacking while they were

healing. The Canaanites could have done the same thing to the Israelites.

B. What might we learn from this?

1st. Prompt obedience is best. A long-neglected obedience will sometimes come due at a very challenging time. It's better to be prompt with obedience to God. Is there something God wants you to do? Don't put off that letter, that apology, that gift, or your baptism.

2nd. We are not reliable judges of what matters and what doesn't. It is best to trust and obey God in all things and at all times.

3rd. The difficulty required by an act of obedience may be the thing of beauty at the heart of that obedience. There is a place where King David says, I will not offer the Lord that which cost me nothing. The fact that an act of obedience is hard or comes at an inconvenient time is not a reason to shirk it. It may be part of the beauty in doing it.

4th. The vulnerability experienced in an act of obedience may be the very issue at the heart of that act of obedience. When obedience requires vulnerability, it pushes us into dependence and trust. God wants us to learn to rely on him. He's glorified when we do.

I was reading recently about a pastor who lost his sister Judy after a five-year battle with cancer. She was a woman who, as he described her, was a party animal—a big drinker, who lived to party. She didn't stop until, in her mid-forties, her world caved in. She found out she had cancer. Sometimes, unfortunately, it takes our world caving in to get us to look up. That's what happened to her. It took a lot to get her to look up, but when she did look up, it was real, and she became a Christian. She sincerely turned to Christ and trusted him as her Savior. She began to live her new life with the same exuberance and enthusiasm that she had lived her old life.

She prayed for the healing Jesus often gives to those who pray but committed herself to him in faith. She began to be convinced that as someone who loved life maybe the greatest miracle might be for her friends and family members, many of whom were not Christians, to realize that because of Christ she could face sickness and death with the same exuberance with which she had gone after life. Not

exuberance of death itself but a strong and joyful faith even in the face of death. As she got weaker and struggled for every breath, she talked her way out of the hospital so she could be baptized and openly show the people in her life the beauty of faith in Christ. Judy invited everyone she knew to come to her baptism service. She shared her story of faith in Jesus. Her 84-year-old father came to faith in Christ that night and was later baptized—along with her ex-husband, a number of nieces, a college roommate, her aunt, and her sister.

Application: Judy could have reasoned, *“Look I’m sick, I’m dying, I’m in the hospital. The last thing I need to worry about is baptism. Do I really have to do this?”* But that’s not the way she thought. Why? When your faith in and love for Jesus as Savior is authentic, you don’t look for ways out of expressing your love of showing your faith. You don’t ask if a particular act of faith or obedience is a big enough thing to warrant your attention. You want to do the things that express your faith and honor your Savior.

Conclusion

Baptism can be many things, an act of faith, courage, or humility. It can be a celebration of past grace, and at the same time preparation for future battles. It can be a courageous declaration of dependence and allegiance. If you have not been baptized as a believer in Jesus, take this step of obedience this summer.

If that is not your issue, then ask yourself about this broader principle. What is it that you have overlooked, as a little thing, that might not be such a small thing with God? Faithfulness in little things is a big thing.

Amen

¹ Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4