

## THE PROMISE



**YOUR JOB IS TO LEAD,  
TO BE A SPOKESPERSON FOR MEANINGFUL VALUES,  
TO MODEL BIGNESS OF SPIRIT  
AND TO SEE THAT TOMORROW IS CREATED IN A BETTER IMAGE**

*Scripture:*

**Ephesians 5:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

<sup>3</sup>But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints.

<sup>4</sup>Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup>Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

<sup>6</sup>Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup>Therefore do not be associated with them. <sup>8</sup>For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— <sup>9</sup>for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. <sup>10</sup>Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup>For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; <sup>13</sup>but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, <sup>14</sup>for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’

**Ephesians 5:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup>making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup>So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup>Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.



### **I WILL BE WITH YOU**

Matthew ended his Gospel with the Great Commission that Jesus gave his followers on a mountaintop. Scholars say this is the key to the gospel, and something like a table of contents, placed at the end.” The last words of Jesus called the disciples to leadership when times were difficult for them, and he completed this challenge with a promise.

Jesus told his disciples: “Every kind of authority, in heaven and on earth, has been given into my hands. Therefore, go out and teach all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, instructing them how to fulfill all I have enjoined upon you. And see! I am among you every day until the ending of the ages.”

This is the first explicit invocation of the Trinity in the Gospels, and this has become our baptismal formula. This promise completes a ministry that began with the baptism of John, and ends with the call to baptism for us all.

### **WHAT WAS THAT PROMISE?**

Now just exactly what was that promise? Jesus said, I have called you to leadership, and I promise I will be with you.

But this promise is bigger than Jesus.

### **WHAT DID THE LORD SAY TO ISAAC?**

Genesis 26.3: God said, reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham.

## **WHAT DID THE LORD SAY TO MOSES?**

Exodus 3.12: He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

## **WHAT DID THE LORD SAY TO JOSHUA WHEN MOSES DIED?**

Deuteronomy 31.23: Then the Lord commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, 'Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them; I will be with you.'

## **WHEN PAUL CONCLUDED HIS LETTER, HE UTTERED THE WORDS OF FAITH:**

2 Corinthians 13.11: Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

And the last words recorded from the mount of Jesus were I will be with you. And see! I am among you every day until the ending of the ages.

Whatever you have to say about the challenges of the heroes of the Bible, the outcome is the same: The people in the story are the people who accomplished great things because they knew that God was with them when the chips were down.

## **MY FATHER'S PROMISE**

My own father made me a promise many years ago. Dad said, "John you can't have a rule for everything. You need to depend upon each other's good will whenever you can." Our family has experienced many changes, and we have resolved them because we loved each other and were willing to work things out. At that point we were talking about the custody of our children in the event of a disaster. It was a memorable lesson at a teachable moment.

## **A PROMISE NOT A RULE**

I'm glad that Jesus didn't give us a rule for every occasion. I'd rather have the promise than a rule.

"I am among you every day until the ending of the ages."

So go ahead and work it out, move on, and think creatively in changing times. Don't think for one moment that God has stopped talking with us. The promise tells us otherwise. And I will be with you, even to the end of the age."

When I remember my dad's promise, I sometimes think he is with me, too.

The Bible is a sample of what people could do when they believed that God was with them.

So what can God do with you?

## **FINISH THE RACE**

Can you imagine being the last person to finish the Tour de France? No, I can't. I can't imagine finishing at all. How many years would you have to train just to say, "I finished last but I finished because I did the training, and I stayed the course"? That's the message. Try to finish the races you begin.

That is how we keep God's promises with us. We train ourselves in them.

**We pray to God when times are easy,  
so that we will know how to pray to God  
when times are more difficult.**

We finish the race, because we have trained for the race, and we are committed to finishing the things we have begun.

Finish the races you have started with your children, and be there when they need you.

Hang in there with your church when the challenges are great;

Be there for each other, even when there is disease, divorce, or depression.

Live in harmony with the natural world, and overcome destructive emotions with faith and self control.

## **STOICISM**

The greatest philosophical influences upon the theology of Paul and the New Testament were Jesus Christ and Greek Stoicism. We find this mixture throughout the Gospel of John, the book of Acts, and in our lesson today that comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

We are so familiar with Stoicism that we don't distinguish it much from the teachings of Jesus. We read the Gospels that were thoroughly doused with Greek Stoicism. They understood that spiritual living meant living according to reason, and virtue is to be in harmony with the universe's divine order. Harmony with the divine order recognizes the universal logos (reason), an essential value of all people. The meaning of life is freedom from suffering through apatheia; that is, being objective, having "clear judgment," not indifference, and not subjectivity.

Stoicism is about virtue, reason, and natural law.

Through these, people develop self-control, endurance and hope to overcome destructive emotions.

The Stoic does not seek to extinguish emotions, only to avoid emotional troubles, by developing clear judgment and inner calm through diligently practiced logic, reflection, and concentration. We must learn to be free of anger, of envy and jealousy.

Jesus and the disciples were in Galilee returning from travels to the local villages. He taught the disciples a very Stoic lesson: They returned to Capernaum, the city that Jesus had adopted as his new home after leaving Nazareth. When they reached the house where they would be staying, Jesus looked back at the disciples and said, "Oh, by the way, what were you arguing about on the road?"

Jesus asked them what they were arguing about.

34. But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

35. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

36. He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,

37. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

38. "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

39. "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me,

40. for whoever is not against us is for us."

### CHURCH LEADERSHIP

This is a scripture which needs very little translation, and it is as true of leadership today, as it was in Capernaum.

**Leadership in the church is service in the church. Being first means being willing to be last. Being first is about outlasting problems, and thinking through difficult questions, rather than expecting quick solutions and expedient sound bites.**

Let me put it another way. Anything that you think is black and white is not black and white.

People act from the character they have learned. Don't be satisfied with a black and white world, when you would be willing to spend thousands of dollars for a great big television that delivers the world in a million different shades and contrasts.

Paul took a stoic message to the Ephesians, telling them to be patient with each other.

(Ephesians 4)

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul said, "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ... We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time ... sing psalms and make a melody to the Lord in your hearts."

### "LITTLE ONES" IN FLORIDA

I want to tell you about John Dunworth and his concern for the "little ones" in a remote school district in Florida.

PENSACOLA, Fla. (Sept. 23) - A headline in the Pensacola News Journal caught John Dunworth's eye: "Residents fight to save their school."

The school board in neighboring Santa Rosa County was to decide that night whether to close the small, over-budget, low-performing elementary school in the rural hamlet of Munson and bus the children to schools twenty miles away.

Dunworth, a former college president, was so moved by the community's determination to save its school that he offered to come out of retirement and be principal for a year. Not only was Munson Elementary saved, it recorded the biggest gain in test scores of any Santa Rosa school in 1997-98 and now ranks first in writing and second in math.

"When he took over the school, the teachers' attitude and everything else changed," said Jim

Drewry, 50, a landscaper whose daughter was in kindergarten at the time. "They were more understanding and caring and more concerned about the students actually learning and not just putting in the time."

Prior to John Dunworth, the school had the county's lowest test scores, the cost per-pupil - \$6,078 - was nearly twice the county average, and parents were removing their children. Enrollment had been projected to drop from 87 to 67 pupils.

There was no principal. The principal of Central High School, twenty-two miles away, oversaw Munson Elementary but visited only briefly a couple times a week.

So the board accepted Dunworth's offer and gave him his four handpicked teachers. They gave the school and community one year to turn things around - and they did.

In addition to the academic gains, costs were cut and enrollment stabilized at around ninety but is expected to increase.

Among Dunworth's principles: Respect, belief, leadership, parents and teachers working as a team. The list pointedly excludes some reforms in vogue these days. Dunworth contends private school vouchers, grading schools based on standardized tests and penalizing failing schools are counterproductive and a danger to public education.

"The primary thing he did for us was being a source of inspiration," families said. "We saw how much he really believed what this little school could become."

### **GENERATING LIFE – CYNICISM AND GENEROSITY**

As people grow we have to decide where life is taking us. What will we do with what we have attained? Essentially there are two choices. One is cynicism: Looking at the failures of the world around us, looking at the flaws in leadership, and seeing the local and global problems in our world, do we give up? Some give up. Some despair and become suspicious and cynical. Some mock and they sneer. Indeed there is much to be cynical and distrustful about, and cynicism is always an option.

But generosity is the other choice. What have we generated from life? What will we give away to improve culture; how can we use what we have learned to enrich others? It is a choice each of us has to make – if we are lucky to live long enough.

**The choice between cynicism and generosity is not a question of length of life; it is a question of spiritual maturity that can come at any age.**

Dr. Dunworth gave people a strange example. He had looked forward to retirement as many people do. He had been a contributing member of society, and now, in retirement, he was living on his savings and his pension. But that was not his choice. He believed that caring for others would keep him young; caring creates purpose and connections. He knew that we are old when there is no one left to care about.

### **THE OLYMPICS**

I'm looking forward to the Winter Olympics in February.

Do you remember Eddie "The Eagle" Edwards? He was on the Great Britain Olympic Ski Jumping Team. He stepped up for his country that had no snow.

Do you remember the Jamaican Bobsled Team?

I've forgotten the names of the people who won the medals in the last winter Olympics. But I do remember that the most compelling stories were those about the athletes who were glad just to be at the Olympics, and who stepped up for their country.

Can you imagine being Eddie "The Eagle" who finished last in the ski jumping? No, I can't. I can't imagine jumping off a mountain at all. That's what makes him a hero and example. He gave it all he had, and we found inspiration in that.

Jesus said, I will be with you always, but you have a job to do. So step up:

**Your job is to lead,  
to be a spokesperson for meaningful values,  
to model bigness of spirit  
and to see that tomorrow is created in a better image.**



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