

1 Samuel 7:3-17 - Rededicating Your Life to Jesus

I was saved by God's grace when I was 14 years old at a church camp. I didn't grow up in church, didn't understand many things about the Bible. So understanding church culture was a new experience for me. The rhythms and cycles of church were all new.

One of the things that happened maybe 2 or 3 times a year throughout my high school years were youth retreats. Where you'd go away for a couple of days with groups from other churches listen to preaching, play games, hang out with friends, so on. We support CLBC that does that very thing - I've spoken at maybe half a dozen of those retreats.

And I noticed a pattern that happened at these youth retreats - not only to me but to hundreds of others as well. A lot of people who showed up to a youth retreat came with their spiritual life basically in the toilet. That was almost always the case with me. Most of the people had given up reading the Bible since the last retreat, they didn't pray very often, church attendance was spotty, and usually there was some sin - or many sins - they were caught up in that was suffocating their walk with Jesus. And during the retreat the speaker would encourage people either to believe in Jesus for the very first time or to rededicate their lives to Jesus. And since most of the kids who went to camp were believers, a whole bunch of us would rededicate our lives to Jesus.

And that would last about 2 weeks, maybe 3 if we were diligent. We'd be in our Bible, be more focused on prayer, work at ridding sin in our lives, trying to be more holy. And then our lives would fall apart and we'd wait for 4 or 6 months for the next retreat and then do it all over again. We'd end up rededicating our lives several times a year.

And I think that's a pretty common experience not only among kids, but among adults as well. Over the years as I've gone to retreats and conferences and it's like a spiritual recharge. And that's not a bad thing. There's a couple of retreats coming up at CLBC that I would encourage you to go to. Lord willing, I'm going to 2 conferences next year on top of 3 local conferences here in Spokane. I'm not against conferences or retreats or going away from your routine to learn more about the Lord. Sometimes I think that can be very helpful.

But let me ask you this: If you're struggling with following Jesus right now - If your day to day life is not what you think it should be in terms of following Jesus - why wait for a retreat or a conference to rededicate your life to Christ?

See the reality is that as God's people we know - for the most part - how to follow the Lord. If you're a new believer you might need some guidance. But for the rest of us I think it's pretty straightforward: Remember that you're saved by grace, not by works. Be in the Word, be in prayer, be in fellowship, rid yourself of the sin you know of, be faithful in obedience where you know you should be, obey your parents, love your wife/husband, raise your kids for Jesus, tell the lost about the gospel. There, I just saved you \$75 and a weekend.

Obviously, that's a little bit of a joke. The reality is that the hard work happens once we leave and go home and face the reality of day to day life. Following Jesus takes work and self-discipline and encouragement from others.

But what I want to encourage you is to not treat our spiritual lives like New Years' resolutions. "Yeah, I'm going to join the gym in January - but in the mean time I'm going to pound down this pumpkin pie." "Yeah, I'm going to get on a budget and manage my money better, but in the mean time I've got some toys I want to buy." And if we're honest when we see people doing that we're thinking: "If you're just going to have to burn off all those calories in 3 weeks, why add them now?"

But when it comes to our spiritual life, we kind of do the same thing. And what I want to encourage you with this morning is: don't wait. Don't wait for something to come along to get you to do the things you already know you need to do to nourish your soul. You don't need January 1st to start reading your Bible again or the next retreat. You don't need to go to some conference for them to tell you to pray and serve. And you don't need God to discipline you until you just can't take it any more.

Part of the reason we gather every week is to be reminded of those very things. We have a mini retreat every Sunday - it's called church. Not to remind of our guilt, but to remember what we are called to.

What we have here in **1 Sam. 7** is Israel basically rededicating themselves to the Lord. The term "rededication" isn't my favorite term, but I think we all get the idea. It's the people of God turning from their sins - maybe a pattern of disobedience - and following after God because he has been so gracious to us.

And what I want to show you is that on the one hand, it's good that they're doing this. They need to return to the Lord. He's disciplined them severely. But on the other hand we're going to look at some of these things and go: isn't that what they should have been doing all along? The answer is yes, but they hadn't been. And for anyone who has strayed from obedience to the Lord, we have to start back at some point, don't we?

So even as I remind you generically to turn back to the Lord in obedience this morning, I want to look at several specific ways to do so from this chapter.

1) They turn from idolatry. Read 3-4

As I mentioned last week, Israel was not completely committed to the Lord. They were involved in very obvious and rampant idolatry. And yet, I think if you were to have asked the average Israelite back then if they worshipped God they would have said "Of course we do!" "He's a great God. He saved us out of Egypt, he's given us so many blessings." And yet, they clearly worshipped other gods.

Now this seems pretty obvious, but if you're going to follow Yahweh - the Lord - you can't follow other gods. God cannot be just one of the many gods on our shelf of trinkets. You have to turn from idolatry. The problem is that our hearts are so easily deceived and so easily distracted that we actually have to be reminded to turn from other gods. **And** we have to actually be convinced that we are worshipping other gods. That's the hard one.

With Israel, there were 2 gods in particular that they went back to time after time: the Ashteroth and the Baals. It probably won't come as a big shocker that these two gods had to do with fertility and sexual immorality. Ashteroth is the plural form of Ashtoreth which was basically a female fertility goddess. They've found clay plaques of Ashtoreth all over Palestine and they're basically ancient pornography. And what's interesting here is that the word is in the plural form. There wasn't one Ashteroth that people worshipped. They worshipped her in whatever way they wanted to worship her. They made her look however they wanted her to look. They created their own false god and bowed down to it.

Baal was the male fertility god. Actually, in Canaanite mythology Baal was married to Ashtoreth as well as her sister. Not all that surprising, I guess. And again, the word here is also in the plural. Baal could be whoever you wanted him to be. There was a sense in which although there was a mythical story that attached these 2 together, there was no one Baal that everyone worshipped. They all had their own private idea of what they wanted their immorality to look like.

And before we write this off as ridiculous, I think we need to realize that Baal and Ashteroth still exist to this day. We just don't call it that. We have dozens of channels of Ashtoreth and Baal. We have the ability to display our Ashteroth on 50" High Definition TVs with live streaming; watching shows that we know should be watched. Or we can access our Baals in our pocket with our smart phones and hidden browser features. Or in fiction novels with romantic themes. This is simply sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality has always plagued the people of God. And ironically, the people of God have largely had to be convinced that it is, in fact, a plague. Maybe some of the more obvious failings we might admit to. But we watch things we'd never watch if Jesus were sitting in our living room or sitting next to us while we're on our smart phone. If you're not married you might be tempted to do something with your significant other you wouldn't do if Jesus were right there. Or if you don't have a significant other, longing to do those things. You read through the NT and take note of this sin in particular and it seems as though the various churches all had to be convinced to get this out of their lives. Which means whatever they were doing was not so obvious on the surface. It was sneaky, it was subtle compromise.

It affects men and women, young and old, married or not. And it's affected believers in every generation. Abraham was immoral. Jacob was immoral. David, Solomon, all of the Israelites who came out of Egypt. The church in Corinth, the church in Thessalonica, In Revelation the church in Pergamum, the church in Thyatira, And the Lord gives the most severe warnings for sexual immorality.

And I think it's significant that the first step in Israel returning to the Lord is getting rid of the sexual immorality in their lives. It's hard to run the race of faith when we have the boat anchor of sexual immorality wrapped around our leg.

2) Confession of sin. Read 5-7

So what we see here is a massive confession of sin. This is the whole of the people of Israel crying out to God for forgiveness.

And I think we can learn a couple things from this. First, it's corporate. It's all Israel. They together had been unfaithful to the Lord. Every single one of them? Every single person had a Baal or an Ashtaroth? Well maybe not every single person. We know from earlier in the book there were those who were trying to be faithful to God but were met with hostility by the corrupt religious leaders.

But here all Israel showed up. Why would everyone show up if not everyone sinned? Here's what we need to understand - and it's a little hard for us as individualistic Americans. There's a sense in which as believers we are part of the same body. We are one, united in Christ.

1 Cor. 12:20, 26: Even though we are individuals, we are one body...if one part of the body suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together.

When our brother across the aisle from us is caught up in sin, or spiritually depressed, or discouraged we don't just go "bummer for him." No when she is suffering we all are suffering. Whether you know it or not.

Imagine if your heart was failing, you were having a heart attack. And your feet were like, "Yeah, that's too bad. He shouldn't have eaten all those steaks - I'm not going to the doctor." No, when your heart is failing, who goes to the doctor? The whole body goes. The whole body is involved in the suffering or honoring of the body.

This is very foreign to us.

When I lived in Kentucky I worked for a company that had two locations. One location dealt with tile and our location dealt with granite slabs. But sometimes a customer would buy tile, then it would be sent over to our location for custom fabrication. Well, sometimes it didn't go so smoothly. I remember one guy showing up to our location looking to pick up his tile order. And I told him I hadn't even seen a tile order for him. I called the other location and sure enough, they forgot to send the tile over. And the guy was livid. And I kind of shrugged my shoulders and explained it wasn't my fault. And he said: Jason, I understand that you didn't do anything specifically wrong. But your company wronged me. And you are part of your company. And if your company cannot deliver the product they say they're going to deliver I'll go elsewhere." You know how I responded? "I am very sorry we failed you. We'll get this order finished right away."

Corporate confession is a big deal in the Bible. Corporate coming to God even when not everyone is expressly guilty.

They are also earnest in their confession. They are fasting before the Lord. Fasting in the Bible is usually accompanied with earnest prayer. It's a show to the Lord of the seriousness of our petition.

The Israelites also poured out water. We don't know exactly what this symbolized. Some say that it was an act of self-denial - maybe fasting from water as well as food. Others say it was a visible sign of washing away of communal guilt. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that whatever it was was a significant part of their repentance. They wanted their repentance to be visible and obvious. Not only to the Lord, but also to each other. Water is often used as a sign of repentance. When John the Baptist baptized people, there was an obvious connection between the water and their repentance.

In all of this what we see is a heartfelt confession of sin. We see people who earnestly desired the Lord to purge them from their unfaithfulness. And they were willing to go before the Lord in confession.

We also see a return to 3) Persistent prayer **Read 8-11**

So there is a longing for continual prayer. Now, to be fair, they are asking Samuel to pray for them. But nonetheless they realize the importance of asking Yahweh's help for the situation.

And this is basically a re-do of chapter 4 but the situation is now worse. In chapter 4 the battle was essentially on the border of the Philistine territory not far from the Mediterranean Sea. But in the time since that battle and while the Ark was in the Philistines control, the Philistines have gained ground. They've moved 15 miles inland. They've captured cities left and right.

This would be like Great Britain coming into America now and recapturing everything east of the Mississippi River. This was massive invasion into the Promised Land.

In chapter 4 they trusted in unrighteous leaders, emotional exuberance, and they used the Ark of the covenant like a lucky charm. And they got creamed. Here they realize the only hope they have against the Philistines is to go the Lord in prayer. Continual, earnest prayer to God for deliverance and help.

And Samuel takes a lamb, he sacrifices it to God and God answered him. And he answered him in one of the most profound ways possible when it comes to battle. **Read 10**

One of the ways God pours out specific judgment on his enemies is to throw them into confusion. It's a blinding of the enemies mind where the enemy basically turns on themselves and begins attacking themselves. It happened in **Joshua 10** when the Lord made the sun stand still. It happened when Gideon went to attack the Midianites with just 300 men. How were 300 men going to possibly overtake an army that was like sand on the seashore, like locusts without number? Easy, God would turn them on themselves. It happened other times as well.

These were not rag-tag people who had no battle training. These were warriors who fought all their lives. How do warriors who have fought all their lives suddenly get confused and start attacking each other? The judgement of God.

The Israelites turned back to prayer. The Israelites realized all their efforts, all their own imagination, all their own attempts to deliver themselves from the enemy were worthless. They finally realized the only one to whom they could turn was God.

A lack of prayer is one of the most consistent struggles that Christians have. And a lot of times it's not that we need to carve out 30 minutes a day in devoted prayer to God, though maybe we should. A lot of times it's that we just sort of forget that God is always with us. It'd be like going through the day with your best friend right next to you but not really talking to them. They're there - maybe you remember that, maybe you don't - but you don't even really acknowledge them. In his book *The Bookends of the Christian Life* Jerry Bridges talks about how believers lose their God-consciousness. Functionally, we just forget that God is with us.

And therefore a return to remembering God's presence and remembering to God to God is almost always part of how the people of God rededicate themselves to God.

I mean, seriously, if you could have 20 minutes with Jesus. Just a sit-down with the Lord where you could ask him for anything. You could ask him for 10 things and you knew that he'd listen patiently to you and wouldn't criticize you and wouldn't get upset if you got a little distracted. What would you ask him? What would you say? And then we have to ask ourselves: Well, why don't we ask him. We can come boldly before the throne of grace, can't we?

Jesus listens to us more patiently and more seriously than a parent will ever stop and listen to their child. If you're far from Jesus, James says draw near to the Lord and he will what? Draw near to you. We draw near to God in many ways, not the least of which is through prayer.

4) Praise God for his faithfulness. Read 12-14

So Israel realizes that God has worked and they praise him for it. Actually Samuel sets up a stone to remember this. We talked about this earlier in the book. The Israelites would often create little monuments to God for his faithfulness. And often the monuments were simply a pile of rocks stacked up in the area where God had blessed them. That was the case here.

Samuel sets up a stone as a monument to God. Now the name of the stone is probably familiar to most of us. The only Ebenezer we know of is Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. And occasionally we sing about this unusual stone in the song, *Come Thou Fount*:

Here I raise my Ebenezer
Hither to Thy help I'm come
And I hope by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home

And probably most of us at some point have wondered: what in the world is an Ebenezer? Well, it comes from this passage. In Hebrew Eben means stone, and hazar means help. So Ebenezer means stone of help. It's the stone that Samuel put up as a reminder of how God helped Israel when they turned to him from sin.

Why do we need reminders of God's faithfulness? Because most of us can barely remember what we had for lunch yesterday. We are so bad at remembering not only significant things in our lives, but significant things God has done for us that we need to be reminded.

5) Submitted themselves to godly authority. Read 15-17

Three times in these 3 verses it mentions that Samuel judged Israel. The judges of Israel were an interesting bunch. And a judge was an unusual position. There was no formal position of judge in the Law. There were rules for kings, for priests, and for prophets. But no laws about judges. And so each judge had different characteristics. To some extent all the judges were military leaders who brought some sort of deliverance from Israel's enemies.

Samuel did that. But it seems as though he rose in power quite a bit over the course of his life. In fact, it seems as though he was essentially a king just without the title because as he got old the people feared that he would put his sons in charge. Samuel's sons were not like Samuel, so the people asked for a proper king.

But they liked Samuel. They liked being judged by him. And really when it says "he judged them" the idea is that he administered justice. He settled matters in their lives. And they submitted to him.

They weren't concerned that he wanted to use them or abuse them, they knew he wanted the best for them. Usually when people go astray the first thing they do is ignore the authorities in their lives. Whether it's civil authority - like the government - or parents or even spiritual authority, like pastors. One of the dead giveaways of disobedience is that we become our own authority.

2 Pet 2:10: says that false teachers despise authority.

Part of returning to the Lord is returning to the authority we've been placed under. Not just because we have to but because it's good for us to be under authority. It's good for us to submit to those God has given charge over us.

Listen, there are many ways in which we drift from the Lord. It's easy for unfaithfulness in one area to bleed over into the next and the next and the next. It really doesn't take long sometimes for us to step back and look at our lives and realize we are nowhere near where we want to be. Maybe some of these areas hit home with you, maybe it's something else going on you need to go to the Lord about.

What I want to do now is give you an opportunity to go to the Lord in prayer. If this is you, to give you an opportunity to confess and ask forgiveness and come to Jesus and remember his unfailing love for you.

As Samuel said: Return to the Lord with all your heart, and serve him only.

Pray