



Someone once said that perception is nine-tenths reality. For most of us, what we perceive to be reality we conclude is just that. There's a lot of wisdom in that, but there's also a problem. The problem is with that one-tenth. Often, we don't have the whole picture when we think we do.

I heard a story about a woman shopping at the mall. She stopped in a food court to rest her feet. She bought a bag of Oreo cookies and looked for a place to sit. It was crowded, so she had to share a table with an older man. She put her cookies down and started to read a magazine. But then, to her surprise, the man opened the bag of cookies and began to eat one. The woman said nothing but gave him an icy stare and grabbed a cookie for herself. The man, with a funny look on his face, ate another. The woman glared and grabbed one herself. The old man finished the third cookie and offered the last one to the woman.

Completely appalled, she grabbed it as the man left without a word. She watched as he went over to the counter and bought a couple of donuts. She thought maybe he'd bought two to give one to her as an apology. But then he sat by himself at another table and began to eat his donuts.

She was so mad she marched over to him, picked up one of the donuts, took a big chomp out of it, put it back in front of him and said, "And a VERY GOOD DAY to you, too!" She stormed out and went straight to her car. She got to her car, opened up her purse, and guess what she found? Her unopened bag of Oreos!

Perception may be nine-tenths reality, but that one-tenth can come back to bite you! Many years ago in college I was a new Christian, very zealous in my faith. I was in a restaurant and saw a man who I knew was a pastor of a local church sitting in the bar, talking with another guy. It even looked like he was drinking a glass of wine. Immediately, I wrote that pastor off as a backsliding, comprised Christian. I judged him based on what I saw but later I discovered he was sharing Christ with that person across the table. Perceptions are not always reality.

This is exactly what Israel discovered in Joshua chapter 22.

Joshua's Charge and Blessing to the Eastern Tribes

In Joshua 22 we read this:

Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh and said to them, "You have done all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded, and you have obeyed me in

everything I commanded. For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you. Now that the Lord your God has given them rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan (verses 1-4).

The background for this is found in Numbers 32. Israel was marching through the wilderness. These two-and-a-half tribes—the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh—came to Moses and said: "When it comes time to settle in the Promised Land, we don't really need to live there. Let us settle east of the Jordan. We like to raise cattle and the land is perfect for that."

Moses agreed, under one condition—the soldiers of the two-and-a-half tribes had to fight with the rest of the tribes as they went in to take the Promised Land. Only then could they go back and settle east of the Jordan. Now, much later, the soldiers of those tribes had done that faithfully. That's what Joshua means when he says, "You've done all that Moses commanded." This was no small thing. Notice he says this took "a long time." In fact, for over seven years these soldiers had been separated from their families while they went and helped the other tribes conquer the Promised land. I hope you can feel the emotion here. These men had fought side-by-side for seven years. They were comrades in arms. I see them going through the camp, finding friends they'd fought beside, saying good-bye to some who'd even saved their lives.

Now the job is done and Joshua sends them back with an honorable discharge. He commends them, but he also commands them. Look what he says in v. 5.

"But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul."

Like a parent sending a son or daughter off to college, Joshua wants to make sure their priorities are straight as they depart. He's concerned the distance between them will cause them to forget who they are. Look again at his commands: keep the commandments, love the Lord your God, walk in obedience to him, hold fast to him and serve him with all your heart.

Then in verses 6-8 he blesses them and sends them off with herds and arms full of plunder from their enemies.

The Eastern Tribes Return, Build an Altar, and Israel Prepares to Attack

So off they go. They cross the Jordan and that's when they did something that would send shock waves through the Israelites.

When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them (verses 10-12).

You might wonder why this is such a big deal. It all goes back to something God said in the book of Deuteronomy where Moses warned Israel about the future. Moses said when you settle in the Promised Land, *"Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you"* (Dt. 12:13-14). God said this because he knows our tendency to idolatry. So to maintain both purity on the one hand and unity on the other God said their worship was to be centralized in one place he'd choose. That would keep them from lapsing into idolatry and division. There was to be only one altar, not two. That's why when Joshua heard of what they'd done he prepared his troops to attack their own people.

We might think that's over the top, but to them this was life and death stuff. Remember, they loved these people. They'd fought together in the trenches for years. They were tired of fighting. They just wanted to enjoy their new life in the land. The last thing they wanted was to pick a fight. Yet to them the honor of God and unity of his people was at stake.

But perception isn't always reality, and thankfully they had the wisdom to send an official delegation to investigate what was really going on.

The Israelites Send a Delegation to Confront the Eastern Tribes

In verses 13-14 they send a priest named Phinehas and ten of their leaders to do just that. When they arrived they asked a series of rhetorical questions.

"The whole assembly of the Lord says: 'How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the Lord and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the Lord! And are you now turning away from the Lord?"

"If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel!" (verses 16-18).

They mention the sin of Peor where some Israelites fell into idolatry and immorality with Moabite women, and a plague fell the whole community as a result (Numbers 25). A little later in v. 20 they also bring up Achan's sin described back in Joshua 7. Achan had hid some of the "devoted things" in his tent and 36 men died in battle as a result. Obviously, they were afraid of the same thing happening again.

Notice how straightforward they are. They don't pull any punches. They don't come mealy-mouthed saying, "Oh we know you didn't mean anything bad by this. The last thing we want to do is judge you. We understand everyone is different and worships in their own way." No! Instead, they're so united as leaders in their desire to be fully obedient to God, so much in awe of his righteous wrath, and so concerned to preserve the many blessings he's poured out on them that they speak the hard truth.

But there's something I want you to notice here. Look at what they say in verse 19.

If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord's land, where the Lord's tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God.

This is something we can learn from. Not only did they speak the hard truth to their fellow Israelites, but they demonstrated costly love. They offered to share their own lands if somehow that would draw the eastern tribes back to faithful worship of the one true God. They cared that much for their brothers and sisters. This is the kind of love that wins people to God. "If you think your land is somehow defiled and unfit to worship the true God, then come back to the Promised land. We'll make room for you! We'll move out of a few of our villages, make room in our cities. Just don't rebel against God!" That's love; costly love.

How do you think the eastern tribes responded to that? They could have said, "Why don't you mind your own business? Who are you to judge us? You have your altar and we have ours. Who says yours is better?"

The Eastern Tribes Explain the Altar

Look at how they respond in verses 22-23.

"The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day. If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord himself call us to account.

Notice they make a clear confession of faith in the One true God. Twice they say, "The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows!" It's like, "He knows our heart in this." Then they take an oath: "If we've really done as you say — if we've really built this altar to turn away from God — then let him hold us accountable for that." So they basically agree with the stand the western tribes are taking. They don't dismiss the charges because they have no right to judge them. They agree if they've done what they're being accused of they deserve to be judged. But they also give an explanation. Look at verses 24-29.

"No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, 'What do you have to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? The Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you—you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the Lord.' So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the Lord.

"That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar—but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.' On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the Lord.'

"And we said, 'If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the Lord's altar, which our ancestors built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.'

"Far be it from us to rebel against the Lord and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the Lord our God that stands before his tabernacle."

They built the altar because they feared someday the descendants of those in the Promised Land would say they had nothing to do with the God of Israel and have no share in the Lord, which might cause their own descendants to no longer fear the Lord. It's hard for us to understand the barrier the Jordan River created between those who lived on each side. The Jordan Valley sinks 300 feet below sea level, creating a rift more than 160 miles long with the river at the bottom.

The eastern tribes were afraid that barrier would eventually cut them off from Israel and ultimately from God. So, their motive in building this altar was exactly the opposite of what they were being accused of: not to abandon the Lord but to stay close to him! They built it not to offer sacrifices but as a "witness" or a reminder between them and future generations that they worship the true God as well. It was not designed to function as an altar, but it was a replica of the altar. It's like the cross we use today in

our own places of worship. We don't worship the cross, but we use it as a reminder of who God is and what he's done for us.

The Israelites Accept the Explanation and Return Home

So often confrontations like this end badly, especially when it has to do with religion, but this one has a happy ending. Look at verses 30-34.

When Phinehas the priest and the leaders of the community—the heads of the clans of the Israelites—heard what Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had to say, they were pleased. And Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, said to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, "Today we know that the Lord is with us, because you have not been unfaithful to the Lord in this matter. Now you have rescued the Israelites from the Lord's hand."

Then Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, and the leaders returned to Canaan from their meeting with the Reubenites and Gadites in Gilead and reported to the Israelites. They were glad to hear the report and praised God. And they talked no more about going to war against them to devastate the country where the Reubenites and the Gadites lived.

And the Reubenites and the Gadites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us—that the Lord is God.

Phinehas and the other leaders are satisfied and put their guns back in their holsters. There's a palpable sense of the presence of God and the two groups are rejoined in close fellowship. Phinehas and the others travel back and report to the rest of the Israelites what happened and they all praise the Lord. Meanwhile, the tribes east of the Jordan, just to make sure there's no further confusion, name the altar, "A witness between us—that the Lord is God."

Pursuing Unity Through Truth and Love

Certainly this story functions as a warning against idolatry, apostasy and rebelling against the Lord. We should all take those words of Joshua to heart: keep the commandments, love the Lord your God, walk in obedience to him, hold fast to him, serve him with all your heart. Unfortunately, in the long run it wasn't a good thing for those two-and-a-half tribes to live isolated from their brothers. Their descendants would later be polluted by the detestable practices of those around them.

But we can also look at this story as an example of how to maintain unity in the body of Christ. Jesus cares about unity. He prayed we'd be one just as he and the Father are one. Why did this potentially explosive situation turn out so well? I'd suggest the remarkable unity accomplished in this story is the result of two commitments.

First, there has to be a mutual commitment to the truth. This means agreement on what the holiness of God demands. Matthew Henry wrote, "Peace is such a precious jewel that I would give anything for it but truth." As I read this chapter, I'm so impressed by how all twelve tribes take God's truth and his commands so seriously. Do you? Are you a person intent on loving, walking, obeying, holding fast, and serving God with all your heart? I'm not going to be lots of things, but if there's one thing I want to be it's a man of truth. Will you join me in that? Let's be people who cling to truth in a culture that basically says it doesn't matter what you believe. A mutual commitment to the truth goes a long way to promoting unity and harmony in the body of Christ. We don't lower our standards just because to do so will somehow keep the peace.

Sometimes we misunderstand what the Bible says about judging others. We know Jesus said, "**Do not judge, or you too will be judged**" (Mt. 7:1). But he also said, "**If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'** If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:15-17). So there's a place for judgment in the body of Christ and there's no real unity apart from a mutual commitment to what's true and right before God.

But there's a second commitment we must have and that's a commitment to love. If those who are courageous in standing in truth aren't also courageous in standing in love there never will have been a happy ending. We see love demonstrated in this story in many ways.

We see it as the Israelites send a delegation to investigate what's really going on. They go right to the source. They do what Jesus said to do: speak face-to-face to the ones you're concerned about. And they put down their swords as they did it. I read a book recently about the famous baseball player Ty Cobb. The book argued Cobb wasn't the dirty player many accused him of being. But one thing about Ty Cobb **was** is he was a fighter. He'd fight first and listen later and it got him in trouble. You know, one of the qualifications for an elder in the church is that he not be "pugnacious." Isn't that a great word! Do you know what it means? It means to be "excessively inclined to quarrel or fight." There are a lot of pugnacious Christians out there and they're a danger to unity. So go to the source; find out what's really going on.

We also see love in their willingness to really listen to what each other was saying. Proverbs 18:13 says, "**To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.**" Phinehas and his gang listened to the eastern tribes. The eastern tribes listened to Phinehas instead of getting defensive. Love listens. Do you listen? Do you listen before you fight? Do you try to understand as much as you try to be understood? Sometimes what you see on the surface isn't the whole story. Jesus said, "**Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment**" (John 7:24). To do that you must listen and be humble enough to admit when your initial perceptions were wrong.

Another way we see love here is in a willingness to sacrifice. The western tribes made a generous and costly offer to share some of their land if the eastern tribes came back. That's love. Love is a commitment to seek one another's highest good. And sometimes that requires we give up something. Jesus said, "**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends**" (John 15:13). For example, we have a commitment here at CPC that if a couple is living together they separate and one of them moves out before getting married. That's based on our commitment to the truth that couples should be abstinent before they get married. That's a pretty crazy idea, isn't it? Believe me, we don't win any popularity contests with that policy, but that's what God's word teaches. But let's face it, one of the reasons couples live together is the cost of housing around here. So I always tell a couple, "If one of you is willing to move out, I'll find a place for you to live free of charge until you get married." What I usually find is that's not the real issue, but we have to be willing to show costly love as we hold to the truth.

I can't help but think of Jesus on the cross. He was there as broker of both truth and love. The truth was that sin is sin and it had to be paid for because it was such an offense to a holy God. But it was in love that he offered himself to pay the price for us. That's how we pursue unity in the body of Christ: a mutual commitment to truth and love. If we elevate truth above love, we become harsh and people will run from us. But if we elevate love above truth, we become sentimental and we've lost our message. But if we go hard after both, we'll be able to praise God and say with Phinehas, "Today we know that the Lord is with us."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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