



Consider this mission statement of a well-known university: "To be plainly instructed and consider well that the main end of your life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ." Founded in 1636, this university only hired Christian professors, stressed character formation in its students, and placed a strong emphasis on equipping pastors to share the gospel. Every diploma read, *Christo et Ecclesiae* around *Veritas*, meaning "Truth for Christ and the Church." You've probably heard of this school. It's called Harvard University.

Only 80 years after its founding, a group of New England pastors sensed Harvard had drifted from their mission. They were concerned by the secularization of Harvard, so they approached a wealthy philanthropist who shared their concerns. This man, Elihu Yale, financed their efforts in 1718 and started Yale University. Yale's motto was not just *Veritas* (truth) like Harvard, but *Lux et Veritas* (light and truth).

Today, Harvard and Yale are still places of academic excellence. But neither school resembles what their founders envisioned. Steven Muller, former president of Johns Hopkins University, bluntly stated about Harvard, "The bad news is the university has become godless." Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard, confessed, "Things divine have been central neither to my professional nor to my personal life."

Harvard's and Yale's founders were very clear in their goals: academic excellence and Christian formation. Today, that's changed. This is a classic example of what's called "Mission Drift."

Mission Drift unfolds slowly. Like a current, it carries organizations away from their core purpose and identity. But mission drift also applies to our individual spiritual lives. Some years ago when I was in college I had three close friends. We were all committed believers. We prayed together. We studied the Bible together. We served in ministry together. We all had aspirations to make a difference for Christ. But, today, not one of them would claim to even be a follower of Jesus. What happened?

It's this same problem Joshua addressed in Joshua 23. When we come to this chapter, Joshua is an old man preparing to die. A long time had passed since the events of chapter 22. At the end of Canaan's conquest, he was about 90 years old. He'd spent 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in the wilderness, and 7 years leading the contest. He's now 110. So there's been about a 20-year interval between Joshua 22 and 23. Now he knows his time has come,

and so he gathers the leaders of Israel and gives them a final charge. Let's listen carefully to these words.

After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: "I am very old. 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. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.

"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. 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 hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.

"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.

"But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.

"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn

against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you" (Joshua 23).

I don't think it's hard to capture the essence of what Joshua is saying. He's saying, "Up until now you've done well. You've followed the Lord and he's done great things on your behalf. But don't let your guard down. Be very careful to stay faithful to the Lord your God. Don't drift in your mission to serve Him alone." It's funny, these words are similar to what God said to Joshua in chapter 1. They aren't new words or ideas. They're old words that need repeating. They're designed to protect, preserve and safeguard the soul. Though the land had been conquered and possessed, danger still lurked. It's true for us as well. The fact that we've come to Christ and found rest in him doesn't mean we can coast and fail to guard and grow our spiritual life.

I want to look at this speech and answer the question, How do we stay faithful to God over the long haul? How do we prevent mission drift in our own souls?

Remember What God has Done

The first thing is to remember what God has done. Over and over Joshua encourages them to look back and recall the faithfulness of God in keeping his promises to his people. He says:

"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" (v. 3).

"Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain" (v. 4).

"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" (verses 9-10).

"You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (v. 14).

In all of this he points to what God has done for them. Joshua rarely mentions himself as instrumental in all of this. God gets all the credit. It's not about how great Joshua is but how great God is. And you'll notice repeatedly in this speech he refers to God as "the Lord your God." In his wonderful paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates this as "God, your God." I like that. "Look at all the ways God, your God has been faithful to you, delivered you and kept his promises to you. You didn't stand a chance, but God, your God acted on your behalf."

Last Wednesday I got together with an old friend named Leron Heath, a retired pastor. Leron hired me in my first job in ministry. He has Parkinson's but we get together every few months. When I'm with him, I do a lot of remembering. I remember how worried I was that I'd ever be able to make a living as a pastor or anyone would even hire me. I remember how inadequate I felt

when he did hire me. I remember how God provided for us and how he worked in the lives of kids we ministered to. One of them is now one of our CPC Mission Partners. Another is a professor at the Naval Academy. Both are following Christ. It's good to look back and remember. It's not nostalgic sentimentality, but to motivate us to continue to follow him in the battles that lie ahead. He's been faithful! You have a story of God's faithfulness. Don't forget it.

Obey God's Word

The second thing is found in v. 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."* This is almost verbatim what God said to Joshua in chapter 1. That word "obey" means to guard or keep or exercise great care over something. It's sometimes used for keeping a garden, a flock, or even guarding a house against intruders. The phrase literally reads, "be strong to guard and to do all that's written in the book of the law." We safeguard our soul from mission drift by strongly guarding the Word, being diligent to carry out its instructions.

As I've thought about my own journey in relationship to the Bible I recall as a new believer having an insatiable appetite for the Word. I couldn't imagine a day without it. But later that cooled and I went through a season of being more in love with books about the Bible than with the Bible itself. I also felt if we really challenge people to read their Bible every day, that's legalism. But the result in my life when I read the Bible seriously and thoughtfully isn't legalism, it's greater freedom and strength, the ability to live life more gracefully.

Arthur Rubinstein, the world-famous pianist wrote about the importance of practicing every day: "If I don't practice one day, nobody knows. If I don't practice two days, then I know. But if I don't practice three days, the whole world can tell." We need to immerse ourselves in God's word every day—to practice it. When I choose not to be in the Word, I'm depriving myself of sustenance, and that's going to show up. Peter said to *"long for the pure milk of the word so that by it we can grow in respect to salvation"* (1 Pt. 2:2). It's not just information we need. It's digesting that information and letting it change how we think and live.

But there's another reason to do this. We know there were still Canaanites in the land. Right after the command to obey God's word he says, "Don't associate with these nations that remain among you; don't invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them." Later he warns against becoming allies with them and intermarrying with them. The message is clear: if we neglect God's Word we'll become susceptible to idolatry.

This is tantamount to caving into the world's values. Our world is full of idolatry, and the human heart is a factory of idols. An idol

can be a physical object, property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero—anything I think about and get more excited about than God; anything that would ruin me if I lost it, anything I'm willing to compromise my walk with God to keep. It's usually good things that become our most alluring idols. For example, work, a gift of God, can become an idol. Family, an institution created by God, can become an idol. Being well-liked, a legitimate desire, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means we never risk disapproval.

Early in my ministry I made an idol out of ministry success. I've always been driven to achieve and perform to prove my worth. For many years I felt God was holding me back; that I had so much more to offer the Christian world than I was allowed to give. I was like Jacob wrestling with God, demanding he bless me. I remember how God's Word would often speak to me in the midst of that struggle. It would correct me and remind me of who I am in Christ and no amount of recognition or success could take his place. Staying in God's Word curbed my idolatry.

Hold Fast to the Lord Your God

This leads to the third thing. He says in v. 8, *"But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God."* The idea here is instead of holding fast to other gods, we're to hold fast to the Lord our God. That word "hold fast" literally means to cleave. He uses the same word in v. 12 when he warns against cleaving with the nations around them. It's a word that points to total commitment, loyal devotion and deep personal affection. The same word is used in Genesis 1 about the exclusive relationship between a husband and wife. You know—a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two become one flesh.

Our relationship with God is like that. We're to cling and cleave to God as with a spouse. We're to cultivate our relationship with God as with our wife or husband. We need to spend time with him; talk to him, listen to him, trust him. And it's an exclusive relationship. There's a certain separation from other loves that's necessary. There's an important spiritual principle here. Either we're going to cling to the Lord exclusively—and the result in our life is going to be security and strength—or we're going to cling to anything else we can get our arms around. You can't cling to two things. Jesus put it this way, *"No one can serve two masters. Either you'll hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other"* (Mt. 6:24).

Of course Jesus was talking about money. And what was true in his day is also true in ours; that's the thing that will most often steal our hearts from God. If we cling to our money we can't cling to God. The underlying issue is one of security. Where do I get my security? From God or from money, salary, investments, home equity? That's why giving is so important as a joyful discipline. Richard Foster wrote something profound, "When we let go of money, we're letting go of part of ourselves and part of

our security. But this is precisely why it is important to do it. It's one way to obey Jesus' command to deny ourselves. When we give money, we're releasing a little more of our egocentric selves and a little more of our false security. Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure in the world, and that's worth living for and giving for."

Be Careful to Love God

The fourth thing is found in v. 11, *"So be very careful to love the Lord your God."* Literally, this phrase reads, "so you must guard your souls to love the Lord your God." The word guard is the same word we saw in v. 6. Love is another word that speaks of a marriage relationship. There's a progression in the text as we move deeper and deeper into our heart, from obedience, to unity, to love.

Loving God is our highest calling. This is the very essence of the law: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"* (Deut. 6:4-5). Of course, loving God will mean we obey him, but it means much more than just behaving correctly and doing the right thing. Our relationship with God isn't held together by duty or rules. It's a relationship bound by commitment, passion and affection. This is how God loves us. In fact, our love for him grows in the soil of his love for us. As we experience more of his love for us, we come to love him in the same way. Augustine said, "There can only be two basic loves, the love of God unto the forgetfulness of self, or the love of self unto the forgetfulness and denial of God." The question to ask isn't whether we believe in God, but do we love him? Do we love him more than anything?

Remember Jesus and Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection, and their beautiful breakfast of reconciliation? Three times Peter denied Jesus, so three times Jesus asked Peter, *"Do you love me? Do you love me more than these?"* (Jn 21:15-19). Everything depends on that. As I grow more deeply in love with Jesus, everything else in my life finds its proper place. Will we guard this love with as much care as we guard our marriage, our house, our children, our investments? St. John of the Cross said, "At the evening of our day we shall be judged by our loving." Do we truly love God?

Don't Take God's Blessings for Granted

The last thing that will prevent mission drift in our souls is to not take God's blessings for granted. This comes out towards the end of Joshua's speech. He says, *"But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down*

to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."

I guess Joshua never went to seminary because in all the preaching classes I took you weren't supposed to end on a negative note! But this is a warning. Don't take God's blessings for granted. God's faithfulness is a two-edged sword; he's faithful in both grace but also in judgment.

We know as time went on Israel did in fact cave into the culture around them. They let their children marry Canaanites. They built altars to other gods. Joshua gives four vivid images up in v. 13 of what would happen if they did that. First, they'd become a "snare." Then they'd be a "trap." Then a "whip on your sides." And, finally, a "thorn in your eyes." All this came true. After Joshua, there's the period of the judges, and it's a horrible history. Over and over again the nation does what it wants to do and they end up in bondage. Eventually they're taken into exile, first in Assyria and then in Babylon. In Babylon God allowed them 70 years of suffering, but even then God refused to give up on them.

What does this mean for us? Charles Spurgeon once said, "God will not allow his children to sin successfully." If we don't drive out the enemies in the land, which, for us, is associated with the deeds of the flesh and attachments to the world, then the sins and habits of our flesh and the associated consequences will haunt us. The things we love more than God, the things that we cling to and depend on will end up enslaving us and will be the cause of constant frustration and trouble, like sand in the eyes. The NT calls this "the discipline of the Lord." We have to be careful here. Just because you suffer doesn't mean you've done something wrong. And just because you're being blessed doesn't mean you've done everything right. But there are times in our lives as children of God that he chastises us, and he usually uses some form of pain.

Michelle Akers was an All-American soccer star, earning ESPN's Woman Athlete of the Year in 1985. She became a starter of the first women's national team and helped her team win the first-ever Women's World Cup by scoring 10 goals in five games. She signed a huge endorsement deal and played professionally in Sweden. She even tried out as the place kicker for the Dallas Cowboys.

But just as her star was rising, her health was declining. By 1993 her life was out of control. She suffered from Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS). "When it was really bad," she said, "I couldn't sit up in a chair. The racking migraines stranded me at home, unable even to get up to brush my teeth or eat."

For the first time, she couldn't count on her strength and hard work. She said, "I couldn't bear not to be the best in the world, not to be the one who could bounce back from any injury. It was the only me I knew." Then her marriage broke up and she reached the end of herself. She says, "I was forced to spend a lot of time thinking about who I was. I didn't like what I saw."

She'd put her trust in Christ as a high-school student, but ignored God in college and after graduation. Now sick and alone, she reluctantly accepted an invitation from a friend to go to church. Deep down she knew she needed to get things right with God. "Looking back," she explains, "I think God was gently, patiently tapping me on the shoulder and calling my name for years. But I continuously brushed him off, saying, 'Hey, I know what I'm doing. I can make these decisions. Leave me alone.' Then I think he finally said, 'Okay,' crossed his arms and looked at me sadly—because he knew I was going to make a lot of mistakes by ignoring him. He knew I'd be hurting in the future. It took total devastation before I'd acquiesce and say, 'Okay, God. You can have my life. Please, help me.'"

That's the Lord's discipline. Hebrews says, when we take our relationship with him for granted, "***The Lord disciplines the one he loves***" (Heb. 12:6a). Some pain we just have to endure, but other pain is designed to be a snare, a trap, a whip on our side or a thorn in our eyes, designed to bring us to repentance.

It's no mistake four times in the last three verses of this speech Joshua uses the term "good." He reminds them of "the good promises the Lord your God gave you," and "the good things the Lord your God has promised," and twice, "the good land he has given you." Good promises, good things and good land. It's a subtle reminder that God is good and his ways are good and His blessings are good and the reason he disciplines us is so we might learn that. In fact the Bible says it is "***the goodness of God that leads you to repentance***" (Rom. 2:4 NKJV).

The good news about hearing a message like this is if any of these issues make you uncomfortable, if God has told you you're falling into mission drift, if you're lacking the courage and strength to remain faithful, all you have to do is repent and return to him. God says, "Return to me and I will return to you." He'll give you the ability to remember what he's done in the past, a heart of obedience to his word, a heart that clings to him, is careful to love him, and doesn't take his blessings for granted.

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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