

People of integrity are people of their word. If they say they are going to do something, then they'll do it. Are you a person of integrity? Can you be trusted? Do we keep our promises? This Father's Day message then is not just for Dad's but for all of us.

I read about this man who bought a parrot from the pet store. It was a beautiful parrot but he had a really foul mouth. He could swear like a trooper, and the man was so embarrassed because the bird was driving him crazy in front of family and friends.

So he appealed to the bird by asking him to clean up his language. The parrot promised to change but nothing happened. In fact, his swearing only increased. He grabbed the bird and put it inside a dark cupboard. The parrot went ballistic and swore all the more.

Finally he threw the parrot into the freezer. For the first few seconds the bird squawked and screamed and thrashed around. And then there was silence. He waited a few more seconds and slowly opened the door. The bird calmly climbed onto the man's outstretched arm and said, "I'm really sorry about all the trouble I've been causing you. I make a solemn promise to clean up my language from now on."

The man was astounded. He couldn't believe the transformation and the wisdom of the parrot. Then the parrot turned to the man and said, "I just have one question...what did the chicken do?" Keeping your promises is important then, or you could end up in the freezer.

(Bible) Last week, the passage that Kate addressed finished with the words that after hearing from the Book of the Law and understanding it, the people made personal vows before their God. They put their vows down in writing and the leaders, Levites and priests, numbering 50, put their seal upon it. You see, due to their exile, most of them had never heard God's Word, but now that they understood what God had done for the nation, and expected from them, the people promised to live according to God's ways. They were serious about making and fulfilling their promises before God. Have you made promises to God, only to let them slide?

And so as we come to chapter 10 we see vows made in at least four different categories. The first of which comes in v.29, **“All these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God.”** They vowed to submit to the Word of God.

In fact, the people are saying that they are so serious in submitting themselves to God and His Word that they are prepared for the curses of God to fall upon them if they did not carefully obey what He says. They bind themselves with a curse and an oath. Now, there's a challenge – to have that same degree of devotion – prepared to accept punishment if they failed to follow through – to submit to God's Word; to always and only, seek the Lord's direction and advice through His Word. How many of us always and only, look into God's Word when we're facing questions or looking for direction?

What makes the Word of God and the laws of God so valuable is the fact that they are God's Words and they are always His best for us. The problem within our society, is not that the Bible has been proven to be unreliable, but rather, that society has proven itself to be woefully illiterate as to what the Bible actually teaches. So often, those who critique the Bible don't quote it correctly.

And so, when the people of Nehemiah's day finally heard God's law for themselves, they willingly bound themselves, by oath, to live by it. And in doing so, they made God's Word their solid foundation for their whole society. How well do we know God's Word? How well do we understand it? Do we seek advice from other people or other books, or even through the songs we sing, before looking into God's Word? For our families, or for us personally, do we set God's Word as the foundation for our lives?

And so, not only do they commit to seeking to know God's Word, but to obey it. They promise the Lord, that they will do as He commands them to do. After submitting themselves to God and His Word, these Hebrew believers make a second vow to be separate from their world in verses 28 and 30: **"We promise to not give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or to take their daughters for our sons."**

When we look into the Old Testament there is abundant historical evidence that unequally yoked marriages had led to a decline in Israel's spiritual and moral life; examples like Sampson and Delilah, Solomon and all his foreign wives. The root of the problem was not in racial mixing, but in people of faith marrying people whose faith was in other false gods. It was this very problem that led to 70 years of exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in the first place; the intermarriage of races brought with an acceptance of foreign gods, and a decline in faith in the one true God; the God of Israel.

And if you stop to think about it, "separation from" is simply "total devotion to" God, no matter what the cost. When a man and woman get married, they separate themselves from all other possible mates and give themselves completely to each other. We separate from others, and commit ourselves to be with the one who is our life mate. The Hebrew people separated from the peoples around them and devoted themselves to God and His Word.

And this principal still remains today. Paul advises us in 2 Corinthians 6:14, **"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"** God's concern is that when a believer marries a non-believer the stage is set for conflict, compromise and at times a decline in faith that leads to a conforming to the ways of the world. This however is not a law, but rather a recommendation, and elsewhere God says to the Christian who may be married to the non-believer, **"Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They may be won over by watching your pure, godly behaviour."** (1 Peter 3:1-6)

And so for those who may be considering marriage, or looking for a life partner, I don't think we should be asking, "Will this relationship work out?" but rather, "Will this relationship enjoy God's best blessing, fulfill God's will, and bring glory to Him?" Enjoying God's best for us means separating ourselves from the ways of the world.

Their third promise to the Lord was an extension of their first; to secure sabbath rest. V.31, **"When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts."**

They now understood that the Sabbath was a day that was set aside to honour God. It was separate from all other days and given to God so that they might offer their worship to Him without being distracted by the demands of everyday life. It was a day of witness to the surrounding nations as they saw that one day every week was dedicated to their God. And that it was a day of rest. God had set the pattern for this in Exodus 20:11: "He rested on the seventh day." We need physical rest just as much as we need spiritual revitalisation.

○ There were once two men – wood choppers – and one man challenged the other to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man ate a leisurely lunch and took several breaks throughout the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other guy had chopped a lot more wood than he. He said, “I don’t get it. Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did.” To which the winner responded, “Didn’t you notice? I was sharpening my axe whenever I sat down to rest.” If you’re feeling a bit “under the weather”, perhaps you need to schedule some rest into your days so that you can ‘sharpen up’ again.

And their fourth promise to the Lord was ○ to commit to supporting His work, which involved v.32 right through to the end of v.39. V.32, **"We assume the responsibility for"** & V.39, **"We will not neglect the house of our God."**

The phrase “house of our God” is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored temple. The temple in Jerusalem stood at the heart of the country’s religious, moral and spiritual life. In symbolic terms it proclaimed the presence and power of God among His people and the centrality of all spiritual matters. And so they promised to maintain the temple, and the requirements of their religion – providing all that was needed for the various festivals and burnt sacrifices; providing for the daily needs of the Priests and Levites, etc. They would take full responsibility not to neglect the house of God.

And so within these four areas, the people were promising to follow God’s priorities by submitting to Him, by separating from the world, by keeping the Sabbath, and by supporting the work of God. As they looked back, they saw their time of exile; as they now heard and understood the Lord and His provision for them; they were grateful and promised to live for their Lord. As you look back and look into God’s Word, are you grateful for His love, grace, mercy and provision?

And so, on this Father’s Day we are all challenged about the level of our devotion to God; our separation from the ways of the world; our obedience to our Lord and saviour; our commitment to support the work of the Lord; and being faithful to the promises that we have made.

You see, many a Dad; many a parent has made promises to their kids or to their spouse. And many a promise has been broken. Jesus addressed the need for us to be truthful when making and fulfilling promises in Matt 5:37. ○ He simply said, **“let your yes be yes, and your no be no.”** In other words, be people of integrity; make sure that you are someone that other people can trust. If you say, “I’ll be there at 10:00am” then be there at 10:00am. If you say to your small child, “No you cannot have a bickie before dinner,” then make should you don’t back down, as you will only teach your child that your word doesn’t hold up. And in the broader context within the community, if others can trust us in the small things, then they’ll know they can trust us in the big things. They’ll trust our word.

When it comes to integrity, it’s all too easy for us to look at other; point the finger at their failings; become disappointed, angry and unforgiving. Forgiveness is vital for our well-being, and the health of God’s family. That’s a whole other topic, but today’s message is about making promises, and our integrity in fulfilling them.

I’d like to close with this thought. Making promises and fulfilling them is an expression of our love. That’s why couples make vows during a marriage ceremony. Because, love is more than just a feeling, it’s a commitment or a promise to be married until death do us part, and to be faithful to one another. So, don’t be afraid to make promises, but let’s seek to be faithful to fulfilling them. Let’s seek to be people of integrity and love.

Let’s recommit ourselves to the Lord and to one another as we sing.

Song: TN054 Lord I will