

WORTHY

Jeremiah 35:5-19

I recently saw a quotation that read “Being a functional Adult every day seems a bit excessive.” Is this a good philosophy regarding how we should conduct our lives? We might reasonably argue that all of us need to have some fun occasionally. Since that is a good idea, then we should look for ways to have fun in a responsible adult way.

Without considering the implications of just having fun, another question that might be asked is “when do we get a reprieve from being accountable and responsible?” A summary of what David wrote in Psalms 119:32-171 is “Teach me, Lord, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at ALL times. Explain your law to me, and I will obey it; I will keep it with ALL my heart.” This is a reasonable expectation for those who identify with the family of God. Of course, we recognize and readily confess that no one can perfectly keep every “law” all the time; however, when we recognize that we have failed to accomplish the target, we should concede that failure and do a course-correction adjustment in our lives to get back on track. If, instead, we try to justify the failure in our own minds, then we drift further away from God’s way and will miss the blessings of being close to Him. Most certainly, we should never presume on the grace of God and deliberately choose a way that we know is contrary to His principles and precepts.

Bringing these same concepts to bear on practical everyday life situations, we might consider how we interact with other people. How trusting are we when we are in situations where relying on another person is involved? We like to think that we are very cautious and skeptical; however, we are typically not as careful as we would like to think we are. We go to a restaurant, have a meal and hand over our credit or debit card to a person whom we met thirty minutes earlier and think that this person can be trusted. The point being is that we put a lot of faith (or reliance) in people much more often than we realize. These kinds of interactions work only as long as we and those with whom we interact behave responsibly every time. Even one failure to be faithful really hampers the way we typically function.

During the forty-year period of the prophecy ministry of Jeremiah, God had Jeremiah remind God’s people (the Jews) through whom He was working to accomplish the fulfillment of the promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they were constantly and consistently ignoring and not showing respect for God or His expectations for His family. To get His point across to the leaders of the Jews, God had Jeremiah stage a demonstration of genuine devotion, commitment, loyalty, and faithfulness as a contrast to the absence of these virtues among those who called themselves the people of God.

The demonstration that Jeremiah carried out involved some leaders of a nomadic group of people (called Rechabites) that lived in the area of Israel. The time of this event was early in the conquest of the land by the Babylonians. God used this encounter with the Rechabites to dramatize His message of the unfaithfulness of Judah. Normally, the Rechabites lived in tents and traveled around in the country side with their herds of animals. When the Babylonians started making raids in Judah, these nomads sought temporary shelter in the walled city of Jerusalem. They had moved into the city for protection from the invading armies but had not abandoned their commitment to be nomads. It was during this time that Jeremiah invited the Rechabite leaders to meet with him in one of rooms in the temple area in Jerusalem.

Tested – 35:5-11

⁵ Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups, and I said to them, “Drink wine.” ⁶ But they

answered, “We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, ‘You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons forever.’⁷ You shall not build a house; you shall not sow seed; you shall not plant or have a vineyard; but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.’⁸ We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters,⁹ and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed,¹⁰ but we have lived in tents and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us.¹¹ But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, ‘Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians.’ So we are living in Jerusalem.” Jeremiah 35:5–11 (ESV)

The Rechabites were faithful to the commands of their forefathers and would not be tempted to do anything contrary to those commands. One of the obvious ideas that we notice is that God never required such a mode of living. These out-of-the-ordinary behaviors of the Rechabites are simply human laws. Whether their mode of life was right or wrong was not the issue. The significant teaching we discover in examining this group of nomads is with regard to the quality of their obedience.

Can we think of any group of people in our world today that might be comparable to the Rechabites? If we have ever traveled to certain areas of the states of Pennsylvania or Indiana and we have seen communities of people who are still using horses and buggies for transportation, then we might think of the Amish people as being similar. While their “rules” are not the same as those of the Rechabites, the expectations of conformity to their “rules” are similar. Those who choose to not follow the rules are no longer considered to be part of the group.

Are there practices that certain church groups observe that can perhaps be described as group loyalty that have no bearing on really important issues such as salvation? We don’t have to look very far to recognize that many church groups that identify as Baptists have a statement in their church’s covenant regarding the use of alcohol as a beverage. The word “covenant” is related to an agreement or maybe even a contract. In many such documents we will likely find that members may agree to certain prohibitions or engage in certain behaviors that are neither prohibited nor promoted in the Scriptures. Some may classify such prohibitions as legalisms and, therefore, may choose to not “join” a particular church.

I recently reread the Church Covenant for our church and we have some prohibitions and many good exhortations of expected positive behavior to which members have tacitly agreed to observe by presenting themselves for membership. Many of these prohibition and exhortations are not things that are “conditions of salvation” but are simply agreements that the members have made as a covenant between themselves and other members. Whether we ignore or observe these “charges” and “precepts” do not affect or say anything about our salvation such actions do speak volumes about our integrity.

Restoration – 35:12-17

¹² Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words? declares the LORD. ¹⁴ The command that Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father’s command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. ¹⁵ I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, ‘Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and your fathers.’ But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. ¹⁶ The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command that their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me. ¹⁷ Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, because I have spoken to them and they have not listened, I have called to them and they have not answered.”

Jeremiah 35:12–17 (ESV)

If one group of people can obey and be faithful, then another group can do the same. God used the example of the Rechabites to show the people of Judah that it is possible to be faithful. The Rechabites were faithful to an ancestor – a mere human being. The Jews refused to be obedient to God. If the Rechabites faithfully obeyed laws that are merely man-made, then how much more should the Jews have obeyed laws that were given by God himself! The Rechabite obedience to conscience is very commendable, but the point is that this requirement is one imposed by a human authority figure. While the Rechabites obeyed their forefather, the majority of those who called themselves God’s people did not obey God himself. The application for us today parallels the lesson God intended for ancient Israel: We should faithfully obey all that God has commanded us to do and we should desire to listen to and heed God’s word.

God asks from us only what we are willing to give to one another. The virtues which we exercise in our interactions with each other serve as witnesses against us because we so often refuse to exercise these same virtues toward God.

There are at least three virtues that the Rechabites demonstrated toward their ancestor that impacted the way they lived. These were love, faith, and obedience.

Regarding the subject of “love,” it is difficult to improve upon what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to them. Things we remember from this passage are virtues such as patience, generosity, humility, courtesy, restraint, joy and consistency. We normally associated all these good qualities with how we interact with other people. That is good and it is sometimes difficult to carry out. However, if we consider God’s message to the Jews through Jeremiah, then we should also think about these qualities in our interactions with our Heavenly Father.

When we think about “faith” being demonstrated by the Rechabites, it was simply a matter of these people believing what their ancestor told them in the form of a promise that they would live a long time as we read in the last part of verse seven: “that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.” This is very similar to the fifth commandment that God gave to the nation through Moses: “Honor thy father and thy mother, that thou may be long-lived upon the land which the Lord thy God will give thee.” The Rechabites were faithful to all the points that Jonadab had instructed them to do which was a glaring contrast to the fact that the Jews were faithful to hardly any of the conditions given to them by God as practices that would produce the blessings associated with being the people of God.

Obedience is the result and expression of love and faithfulness. The commandments that Jonadab gave his family involved interactions with the physical world and did not address any spiritual issues. The commandments that God gave to Israel involved both the physical and spiritual realms. We see this clearly in verse fifteen which says “Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them.” It should be obvious that since God’s commandments impact the physical and spiritual realms of our existence that more attention should be given to them than to any other commitments we have.

We have just recently seen a demonstration of the tendency of people (when confronted with a dangerous situation) to blindly put their trust in what someone speaking loudly with an assumption of authority told them to do. When a flu-like infection was globally rampant, we were told to get the vaccine, to wear masks, to avoid touching surfaces, to socially distance ourselves from others, to not take certain medications which had a history of helping with such infections, to stop attending church, to shut down schools, to avoid going to work in an office

setting but it was OK to work in a supermarket, and most people did what they were told to do. Listing these “rules” is not to evaluate whether they were the right things to do but to point out that most people followed an extensive list of “do’s and don’t’s.” In the same way, the Rechabites rule of living in a tent versus living in a house was neither good nor bad in an absolute sense. The issue was whether the people honored their ancestor.

At the same time when we went along with what turned out to be arbitrary rules given by men regarding a health issue, we saw an eruption of promotions of perverse behaviors of certain groups of people who have totally rejected the clear teaching of the Word of God regarding these things. At the same time, our government endorsed and even joined in the promotion of these behaviors and have enabled the advocates to take their teachings into our public schools. While all this was happening, many religious groups welcomed those who openly engaged in activities described as abominations to be leaders in their congregations.

It is clear from these above contrasting behaviors that the rulings of mankind have far more influence on us than the known will of God. Alexander MacLaren observed that many times “We are slaves to usurped authority and rebels against that which is rightful and divine.”

In verse seventeen, God, through Moses, told the people of Israel what would happen to them if they were disobedient. He repeated His warnings through other prophets. Now it was time for the fulfillment of His promise.

Commended – 35:18-19

¹⁸ But to the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father and kept all his precepts and done all that he commanded you, ¹⁹ therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me.” Jeremiah 35:18–19 (ESV)

If a family tradition was preserved with such dedication, why was the very Law of God treated with such disrespect? Obeying Jonadab’s words had only limited and temporary significance, but disobeying God’s Word had eternal consequences!

The exceptional quality of the obedience of the Rechabite descendants to their ancestor Jonadab was indicative of their integrity. This is emphasized when God promised that they will be rewarded by never failing to have a man to stand before him. This was not a promise that their obedience to Jonadab’s rules will preserve the whole family from sliding into the sins of the surrounding culture; only that Jonadab will always have at least one survivor serving God.

We understand and know that people cannot be saved simply by obeying what their non-Christian religion teaches and commands. However, faithfulness that emerges from integrity is a characteristic that is essential for a person to believe unto salvation by putting their complete trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ.