

Promise Keepers
Jeremiah 35
Englewood Baptist Church
Sunday morning, July 14, 2013

Have you ever broken a promise? Surely you have. Not one of us is perfect and we all fail. We say that we are going to do things and we fail to follow through. We say that we are NOT going to do certain things but we do them anyway. We relate to the agonizing struggle of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, when he says,

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Romans 7:18-19

All of us have broken a promise, and we know the pain it brings when we do. Keeping promises produces joy in us; breaking promises produces shame and guilt.

This is **Bill McCartney (headshot)**, the former head football coach of the University of Colorado. From 1982-1994, he led the Buffaloes to a 93-55 record and won three consecutive conference titles. They were crowned the **co-national champions (champion picture)** in the final rankings in 1990.

Despite his celebrated football career, what many of you may know Coach McCartney for was his founding of the organization **Promise Keepers**. God gave him a vision to fill football stadiums with men, who came not to cheer on and to give glory to players on the field, but to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so Promise Keepers became a major movement that affected thousands of men. It impacted me as a young man, when I went to Soldier Field in Chicago, and experienced the excitement of a massive group of manly men all worshipping Jesus and learning what manhood was all about.

Promise Keepers was committed to raising up a generation of men that would honor their vows to the Lord, to their wives, and to others. The 7 Promises were these:

The 7 Promises of the Promise Keeper

7 Promises

PROMISE 1

A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

PROMISE 2

A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.

PROMISE 3

A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.

PROMISE 4

A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values.

PROMISE 5

A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.

PROMISE 6

A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.

PROMISE 7

A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission.

Those are some sacred vows, powerful promises and will make men salty in a bland world. The text that we study today from Jeremiah is an obscure one. It is likely that most of you have never heard of the Recabites.

But Jeremiah is called by God to take notice of these promise keeping people. If only His own chosen people could understand the power of keeping their word, of honoring their vows and promises.

Read with me, Jeremiah's encounter with the Recabites, Jeremiah 35.

The Recabites were a tribe of nomads who lived here and there in northern Israel. When roving bands of Babylonians starting pillaging the Middle East, the Recabites fled to Jerusalem for safety. And sometime after these wanderers had settled inside the city, Jeremiah sends out his party invitations.

V.1...go to the Recabite family and invite them to come...

So the prophet serves like the welcome wagon. He brings these new uncouth, uncultured, uncivilized, unkempt people into the house of the Lord.

And once they arrive to this mysterious party, **bowls of drink are put out before them (recabites image)**. Forget the chips and salsa, forget the cheese dip, or the fruit plate with cheese—big honkin’ bowls of wine are put out before them. It’s happy hour.

Now this must have been tremendously awkward for the Recabites. They were not drinkers but here they were at a sophisticated party and the peer pressure was on. Would they appease the host and drink his wine, or risk offending him and leave all his careful and expensive preparations untouched.

This is kind of like when the Baptist preacher is offered the wine list at the restaurant and church members in the next table are secretly watching: what’s he gonna do?

And in the end of v.5, the prophet gets pushy. He says, “Drink it!” “Have some! Loosen up! Enjoy!” And you could hear the sound of crickets chirping in the corner.

The Recabites were a different kind of people. They had rejected the ownership of homes, and rejected alcohol outright. These people were almost Amish in their way of life as they sought to distance themselves from anything on earth that could contaminate, become an idol, or a stumbling block. They intentionally removed themselves from Israel’s “pop culture.” And they had made promises to their patriarchs that they would continue this legacy with their children and their children’s children.

And so, when Jeremiah puts the bowls of alcohol before their eyes, he was putting to test their entire way of life. He was testing their integrity. Would they remain true to their promises, even when in a private secluded place? Would they risk social suicide to stay true to their convictions?

Today, we can relate to these temptations, can’t we? Alcohol is just one of the many places we can mess up our lives. There is internet pornography always available and on tap. Just a click of the button and a quick erase of my search history, and I could get away with it. There is financial impropriety. Here at the church, I have some line items for ministry expenses, and I could surely purchase some personal items and make up some reason why they serve me in my ministry. Surely the church would want me to have a set of golf clubs! Rest and retreat from the work is good, right? And the temptation is there to compromise my integrity.

On a work trip to Georgia, a female author travels to connect with hundreds of other writers. While she is in her hotel workout room, a young man approaches her with an offer for a quick lunch at the restaurant. Forgetting her children and her children, she agrees to a secret meeting that nobody needs to ever discover.

You see where I am going, don’t you? The Devil is always casting the bait before our eyes, testing our commitment to our Lord.

And on this day, the Recabites were an inspiration to Jeremiah. Here were people who really did care about their promises. Here were people who lived with integrity, with no secret sins brewing, with a clean conscience and a pure heart. They were promise keepers.

In his commentary on Jeremiah, Philip Ryken says:

They usually did not drink, but how could they refuse this time? It would have been churlish of them to spurn Jeremiah's hospitality. Many superficial reasons might have suggested to the Recabites compliance with the prophet's tempting suggestion. The wine was before them; there was no sin against God in taking it; the people around had no scruples about it; and the prophet himself invited them. "When in Jerusalem," they might have said, "do as the prophets do."

Philip Ryken, Preach the Word Commentary, Jeremiah

These men could have compromised. But they did not.

Vv.6-7 says...

And then, in vv8-10, they say, "And we have obeyed everything..."

One interesting note, when the Recabites showed up at the table of Jeremiah, their forefather Jonadab had been dead for 250 years. These people had been keeping their promises for more than two centuries. They were out of fashion in their culture and they did not care.

So...if you are still with me, if you are actively engaged in Bible Study this morning, if you have a good working brain in your head, the logical question that you are now asking is: So...what's this got to do with me? What is the application of this ancient awkward story? What does it mean to put this into practice?

Does this mean we should sell our homes and live in tents? Does this mean we should abstain from alcohol? Does this mean we should do everything our father tells us to do, to an absolute "t?" Where you going with this, preacher? What would God have us to do with this?

Well, it would be a stretch to make this a sermon on the dangers of alcohol. That is not the focus of this text. And it would be dishonest to make this message about the dangers of materialism and owning things and such. That's not what this is really getting at either.

This text is about promises and oaths and obedience. Just look at the context of this passage, what come before it and you can discern what God's message is for us.

If we had more time this morning, if you all would give me an hour to preach instead of this rotten 30 minutes ☺, I would back you up and read the previous chapter. The story there involves a promise breaker named Zedekiah, who violated a treaty he made with another king, who freed the slaves but then went back on his word and revoked his emancipation proclamation. This wretched man was the exact opposite of the Recabites. And that is why these two chapters were arranged side-by-side. God's main issue with his people was their promise-breaking habit. He always kept his end of the deal; they never kept theirs. He swore on oath to their forefather Abraham that He would be their loving husband. They swore on oath that they would be his loyal bride.

Now Jesus, in the New Testament Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, he warns us about the danger of taking oaths lightly. He cautions people to think twice before making a vow. Be slow to "swear on anything." Now, I don't believe that Jesus was suggesting that all oaths are always evil and wrong. We take an oath today in the court of law. Our politicians take an oath of office. Physicians have taken the Hippocratic Oath to practice medicine honestly. At weddings, we take oaths. When a loved one is on his deathbed, his brother may take an oath to look after his children. Even the Promise Keepers 7-fold oath has tremendous intrinsic value.

Sometimes is good and godly and right to make a promise. But when you do take that oath, on the few occasions in your life that you agree to such terms, you should always seek to honor your commitment. This is of the things that marks out a Christian from the wishy-washy culture. A Christian is a promise-keeper, a solemn swearer. The non-Christian serves himself and keeps only those promises that serve his selfish ambitions.

And you may be in a situation now, where you agreed to do something, a year or 10 years ago...and if that is the case, then you should fight to keep your integrity in tact.

The first job I had after I was married was at a small university in Arkansas, called Ouachita Baptist University. I was in charge of men's dormitory, several hundred freshman and sophomore students who played their music way to loud and were not afraid to knock on my door at 2 AM asking for change for a dollar. In that tiny corner apartment, Lynley and I forged our first year together. I spoiled her rotten with lush accommodations.

There were many things I loved about this job and a few things I detested. The main duty I despised was called "Room checks." And a week before Christmas break, I was responsible for walking through every single smelly-socked room and remind these boys that all these things had to be cleaned up before they took off for Christmas break. That trash must be taken out, that pizza with flies on it should be taken to the dumpster, this stuff here all over the wall needs to be scraped off with a knife...and so forth. The point was, let's not leave anything gross in the room allowing it to grow and multiply.

And so when it came time for Dorm Dad Ben to take his pass through the place, I said to myself inside myself, "I think I won't." Surely these boys have learned the basic practices of hygiene; they don't need some dude walking into their space and reminding

them to do their chores. Despite my job description that I agreed to, this part could be set aside.

And so all was good until the day after break began, the students had departed, and the dean over student called me directly and said, “Ben, the president would like to take a walk through of your dorm tomorrow, to see what the present conditions of the place are. What remodeling may need to be done and so forth.”

And inside my head, one word resounded, “Busted.” What I did next was obvious, with a box of garbage bags I began on the third floor and I personally cleaned up messes beyond description. But it was doable, and I did it, but then I came to very last room, the one that shared a wall with Lynley and my apartment. And when I opened that door...there are just some things in life that words cannot express or capture. I do not exaggerate when I say that it truly appeared to be a trash pile, that could only be cleaned up with a shovel, that would require more work than I could supply.

And so, guess what? I had to go to my dean and tell him to his face. Do you remember when you asked me if I had done my room checks? And he said yes. And do you remember that I had indeed completed that task? And he said yes.

And I said, with tears in my eyes, “I lied to you. Right to your face, I broke a promise.” And I’m so terribly sorry. And once this man extended his hand of grace, I said to him, “Now, there are few boys that live next to me that we need to talk about.”

I will never forget that absolute feeling of terror that day when I realized I was a liar and a promise breaker. It was miserable. The inner turmoil I felt was awful. And I am sure that I am not the only sinner in this sanctuary who has a story of lies and broken promises. Surely I am not the only one who said, “I will do that” but I didn’t. “I will send that” but it was never sent. I will say that, but I never said it. I will pay that, but I never paid it. You can count on me, but they couldn’t.

And this was the problem with the Old Covenant. There was nothing wrong with the promises, there was something wrong with the Promisers. They were liars. And so God says to Jeremiah, “Tell the Recabites that they will be safe, for they have been true to their promises but tell the people of Judah that their sin will find them out. They will not get away with it.

And today, we take this text and we hold it up next to Jesus story of the two builders, when the Lord told the story of these two manly men who went to build a life. And one a life on a solid rock and the other built a life on squishy sand. And the rains came down and the floods came up, and bam the storm shakes the house. The foolish man’s place...all his sweat and all his labor, all is washed away in pieces.

And Jesus steps forward and says, “And so it shall be for every single human being who hears these words of mine, but refuses to follow through.”

Sometime later, James the brother Jesus, plants a church in Jerusalem. The very city where the Recabites once roamed, and James says to the Christians there:

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. James 1:22-25

What does God desire of you? That you should hear his call, that you should take an oath to follow, and that you should spend the rest of your life under the oath of discipleship. May promises to Jesus Christ, and then keep them.

And if you do, if you dare to follow, you will be a light in a dark world.