

The Cost of Commitment

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[0 : 00] As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word. And Lord, we thank you especially that our Lord taught that your word is truth. ! And that your truth can set people like us free. And so we ask now, Father, in confidence that you would send your spirit upon your people gathered. That we might discern your truth. That we might apply it to our lives. And become the people you want us to be. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. So, even the least observant people amongst you will have noticed that it is Covenant Sunday. And there's a sense in which I always approach this day with a certain amount of dread. And it's because of this that I don't know how much the words of the prayer which you said together impacted you.

[1 : 10] But I mean, they are mighty words. I mean, I am sure there might be some people of a more secular background who would read these words and think, anybody who would say them must be two kangaroos short in the top paddock. I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing. Put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or brought low for you. See, the reason why I'm anxious about Covenant Sunday is, I say these things, but will tomorrow be exactly like today as far as my life is concerned? Some of you may remember that great movie, Groundhog Day, with Bill Murray, where he played the part of, I think the guy's name was Phil Connors. And he was a rather self-indulgent weatherman, and was very cynical about just about everything. And he went on a weekend, maybe a week away, in this unpronounceable town. And he went to bed on the first night, woke up the next morning.

[2 : 35] As I recall, it was a radio alarm. And his radio alarm started, and it was that wonderful song by Sonny and Cher. I got you, babe. And then there was some banter with the disc jockeys on the radio station, and then he got up, and that would be normal. Except the next day, his radio alarm went off, and it was Sonny and Cher singing, I got you, babe. And the banter that followed was exactly the same as it had been the day before. And what had happened was, somehow, we're not told how, he got himself caught in a time loop, so that that day kept repeating. And because, like many of us, he had an element of self-indulgence about him, he manipulated that time loop for his own good. He manipulated it so he could feed his carnal appetite with women, with booze, with food. And the only thing that could break him was when he actually pursued, I think with dubious motives, a woman called Rita.

[3 : 54] And it was when he fell in love with her properly that he was released from the time loop. It would be a great shame, wouldn't it, if we said that covenant prayer, but actually, tomorrow, our behavior, our person, was exactly the same as the day before, and would be exactly the same as the next day, the next day, the next day.

See, Wesley thought, I think it was the 12th of August in 1755, that he stood up and for the first time read the covenant service in the Huguenot Church in the east end of London, known imaginatively as the French Chapel.

It's the first time. Wesley, of course, was obsessed at periods in his life, not consistently, like most of us, but for periods of his life, he was obsessed with the idea of total submission to God.

You kind of read Wesley's journal and you think to yourself, was he getting much joy out of his faith? Because he was just obsessed with the idea.

I want to be perfectly submitted to God. I really want to lay down my life for him. And I want to say a prayer like the covenant prayer and mean it. I mean, it would be a pretty empty thing, wouldn't it, to say that prayer.

[5 : 28] And really not mean it. It's kind of falling with the herd mentality. Everybody else is saying it must be okay. So a covenant is an agreement.

Unfortunately, I think in our culture today, it has an unfortunate ramification because it has to do with house sales. And you hope that your solicitor will pick up, if you're buying a house, what restrictive covenants there might be.

I think most of us feel that covenants probably are inclined to be restrictive. Actually, what they are simply is an agreement. Usually an agreement that is entered in with the initiative of one person who has a motive.

Lawyers call consideration of something. Well, let me tell you, if you take seriously the covenant that you've entered into today, this will be liberating for you.

It will not be restrictive. It will be liberating. And the initiative in this covenant is God himself. The Bible is full, not full, repeatedly God makes covenants with his people.

[6 : 46] He made a covenant with Abraham. You remember? If Abraham was prepared to leave his middle class life and go off on a scary journey, he knew not where, then God said, I'll bless you.

God made a covenant with Moses. He said, you'll leave people. And Moses wasn't too keen on that assignment. He said, you're not me. I can't even speak properly. And so God said, don't worry, I'll give you Aaron.

Mixed blessing, some would say. And then we come to the prophets. We read from that. You remember at the beginning of the service, it takes a different kind of tenor.

Because Jeremiah prophesies, there will be a day when Judaism will be turned on its head.

Why? Because the way a Jew could become righteous was by keeping the law. I mean, not just the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, but all the stuff that the rabbis added to it, hundreds and hundreds of regulations that they added to it.

[8 : 00] You want to be righteous and be a Jew? You've got to keep the law. And as Paul says, in the Corinthian literature, if you let down, if you let down God in one aspect of the law, you've cancelled, you know, you've just let down in every aspect of the law.

But Jeremiah prophesied something that would turn the whole deal inside out. He said, there will be a day when that law that Moses staggered down Mount Sinai with, ten tablets of stone, that law will no longer be on tablets of stone out there, no longer in the rantings of the rabbis, no, I'm going to put my law where?

In your mind and in your heart. Imagine. That's why we're saved by grace according to St. Paul.

It's not about keeping the law. It's not about doing our best. It's not about trying hard. It's about a God of grace who loves you, loves you, even though you don't deserve it.

What was God's consideration on the covenant that he made and that we have made today? His consideration is his love for you.

[9 : 30] I'm a little nervous about banging on about the love of God because I don't want to make you think that Christianity is just a kind of love thing. You know, like Hyde Anderson, 1964, San Francisco.

No, this is total. This is a commitment to a completely different way of living. And God, in his wisdom, decided it would be best in all those covenants for people to make those covenants with God together so that we have each other to help each other, to pray for each other, to rebuke each other.

when we go wrong. You know, Paul said in Ephesians, chapter 4, that we should speak the truth to one another in love.

I'm not sure there's enough of that in our churches and I wouldn't want to go to a church where there was too much of it. Speaking the truth in love.

I've heard Christian folks say the most terrible things to each other and when you say, why did you say that? They say, I was just being honest. That's not what the Bible says.

[10 : 44] I mean, sometimes the truth is cruel, isn't it? No, the Bible says, speak the truth in love. But the biggest sin in churches is, we think because we're supposed to be loving, that we should never, ever try and speak truthfully to someone else.

So terrible behavior in churches goes by and by and by and never gets challenged. The covenant you've made today, my friend, if you take it seriously, and I can't make you take it seriously, but the covenant you make today, if you take it seriously, is life changing.

It's church changing. It's community changing. And who knows, maybe even world changing.

And you ask yourself this question, how could God ask me to say that stuff, really? I mean, seriously?

Put me to what you put me to suffering? Isn't that a kind of masochistic tendency that I really be better not to go there?

[12 : 04] No. Remember, Wesley's big motivation was total submission. The Garden of Gethsemane.

When Jesus was in the kind of mental pain that's unimaginable. And he even considered not doing what God wanted him to do.

Take this cup away from me, Lord, he prayed. And then he said, not my will, but thy will be done.

I mean, interestingly, you may have missed it, you said that prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? You may have no idea what you just prayed. And this would be an awful imperative to us, wouldn't it?

[13 : 16] If it wasn't for the fact that God hasn't left us alone to struggle. To struggle with our half-heartedness, to struggle with our disobedience, to struggle with our lack of faith, to discover, to just not left us alone with that.

When I leave you, said Jesus in John 16, I will send you an advocate, a counselor. He said, who will teach you everything that I have taught you?

See, we sing that old chorus, don't we? No, never alone. There's a wonderful truth in that. you've not been left alone to struggle.

To struggle with the commitments you made in the covenant prayer this morning. This is truly amazing, I think, that God doesn't leave us alone to mess with it.

And of course, the thing about this covenant is, the reason God can ask me to, why Wesley can ask me to pray that prayer in the presence of God and his people is because of what it cost God to send his son to planet earth, to live amongst us, to be what Saint Anselm called the God-man.

[14:50] Only he could save us. And the cost of that salvation was that terrible death on the cross of Calvary, vindicated by the resurrection of Jesus and glorified in his ascendancy into heaven.

I love the words of that old hymn. I quote it to you now. God, I quote it to God, and when I think about the cross, I close my eyes and try to see the cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me.

I'm going to ask you in a moment to close your eyes and try and see Jesus on the cross, those cruel nails through his hands, the spear through his middle, and see what that tremendous sacrifice does for you.

If we just allow today to be our groundhog day, tomorrow will be just the same as yesterday and the same as the next day.

we have to be serious about this, my dear friends. Let us pray that tomorrow will be different. It may not be easy, but this I know, that whatever life throws at me, I will still hold together.

[16:31] Because God in the power of his Holy Spirit is with me, teaching me, encouraging me, rebuking me. Tell you a story about a young woman just to close.

She was called Joyce and she was in the congregation I served in Slough. I know. You know, Slough is the kind of place where people have got bumper stickers that say happiness is Slough in my rearview mirror.

And we were a very poor congregation in the sense that nobody was wealthy, nobody had much money. We were poor in many ways, but spiritually God made that little group of people very rich.

And in that congregation was a woman who had a terrible, terrible life script. She married a man and he had not, the day after they got married he decided he wasn't going to work anymore.

And he used to lie in bed all day after the pretense of having a bad back. Although if the situation required it, he could move pretty nimbly.

[17:46] And so they were just clocking up debt, day by day, week by week. And in the church, people knew about this. And one day this lady, single lady, I think she's probably three or four years older than me, she came to me, this would be, she'd be 40-ish at this stage.

And she said, Mike, can I have a word with you? And I said, yeah. And she said, I'm really burdened by Alan and Chris' debt. And I feel God is asking me to do something.

I said, what would that be? She said, well, do you know how much their debt is? I said, I'd gather it's three and a half thousand.

She said, yeah, I heard that. She said, I feel God is asking me to give my life savings to them, three and a half thousand pounds.

I was full of kind of nervousness about this. I'm like, you mustn't do that. You know, you've got no idea. They might have the same debt. She said, Mike, I feel God is asking me to do this.

[19:08] She gave it. Alan, the husband, from his bedside, I don't think he ever gave his life to Christ, but a week later he went and got himself a job.

He was a joiner by God. And I tell that story because I think Joyce understood what kind of commitment is the kind of commitment that God honors.

I tell that story because Joyce reminds me that we're not just called together today to come in this house and say hefty things and walk out again. No.

We're asked to tell God that we're fully submitted and then, this is the difficult bit, we're supposed to live like we're totally surrendered.

Holy Spirit there to help us but you're there to help us, you're there to help me with this, I'm here to help you with that. That's why we said it together.

[20:28] Put me to doing, put me to suffering, put me to that costly kind of sacrifice that God showed me in his love for me, in that God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

I need your help. We need each other, we need the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And if we're prepared to take that covenant seriously, we have a fighting chance.

Change life can mean a changed family, a changed family can mean a changed church, a changed church can mean a changed community, a changed community can mean a changed county.

It goes on and on and on. That's the way it's meant to be, the multiplier effect of committed Christianity. I don't know about you but I can't end by saying this, I am well up for it.

I just need a bit of help like you do and like God offers. In the name of that amazing God who covenants with us because of his love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the people who agreed said together, Amen.