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“Keeping Perspective”

Sermon Series: “ Keeping Your Edge”

Sunday, October 7, 2007©

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Scripture Lesson: *Leviticus 23:9-14*

Do you have a Lord or a Divine monkey wrench?

Lord God, we praise and we thank you for this world and the redemption which you constantly bring into it. Pour into us this morning your Holy Spirit so that we may hear your Word and be transformed by it. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

When I was in youth group myself we used to have lock-ins. We went to a small church where the pastor did everything. And he loved going to lock-ins with the youth. Every lock-in we used to play Risk, the game of world domination, where you line up armies and take over the entire globe. Pastor Jim was unstoppable. He had a system which he played every time, and every time he won. He was ruthless. He was without mercy or charity. He was like a Methodist Genghis Khan. To make matters worse he would gloat over his win, he would lord it over you. I told him once after he flaunted a victory, “I thought ministers were supposed to be nice.” He responded, “That’s a myth,” a line which has come in handy over the years. After getting my lunch handed to me time and time again by Pastor Jim, I determined that I would use his system against him. He picked up right away what I was doing, but he was defenseless. My invincible military hoard stormed over Pastor Jim like a possum on the interstate. It was a thrill unmatched. Teens who had been unceremoniously vanquished from the Risk board from lock-ins before, gathered around my chair as the Pastor was

routed. I was a hero. But as Pastor Jim gathered himself, removing the last remnants of his sad army from the playing board, he said, “Remember, you won because you did it my way. Give credit where credit is due.” And he was right. We need to remember who deserves the credit, especially when we win the victory.

The Scripture lesson today is about who gets the credit. God laid down some very specific instructions for the Israelites for when they entered the Promised Land. You may never have been told that getting to the Promised Land was no minor feat. The Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt. They escaped through the desert only after God visited ten plagues upon the Egyptians. They passed on dry land through the Red Sea after God had parted it. And then they wandered in the desert for 40 years—battling snakes and disease and bad food, too little water, the sandstorms, the heat and the cold. But God provided for them at every turn; manna from heaven, quail which literally fell from the skies, water from a rock, healing from poisonous snake bites.

To get into the Promised Land they had to conquer the Jebusites, Perizites, Amorites, the Hittites, the Parasites, the Stalagmites and the Stalagmites. They sacked every city where there was no Kosher Deli. They razed every altar to a foreign god. It is one of the greatest military conquests of all time. In fact, this conquest was so incredible that many more liberal-leaning Biblical scholars question that it even happened. But there is

too much historical evidence that this was indeed a victory of victories, a triumph of triumphs. It was Normandy Beach, Queen Elizabeth's Navy defeating the Spanish Armada, the Chiefs over the Chargers last Sunday, the Royals defeating the Cardinals in '85. Taylor Hicks winning season five of American Idol.

We need to remember who deserves the credit, especially when we win the victory. It is very clear to the Bible who should get the credit for this victory.

Leviticus 23:10 "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest." And then the Lord goes on to tell Moses that they should also bring a male lamb, a year old, without blemish as an offering. And they should bring about a gallon of fine flour mixed with oil and a quart of wine. And, by the way, they shouldn't even eat or drink themselves until they had given thanks to God. More importantly we are told that this was a "statute to be kept forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations." That means, whenever we enter into God's promise, all of us, everywhere, at all times, are to give thanks to Him before we do anything else.

Why is it so important that we thank God with our firstfruits? Because we need to remember who deserves the credit, especially when we win the victory.

By thanking God with our firstfruits we give Him the credit and we recognize an important truth, maybe the most important truth of living in this world. Let's conduct a little test here this morning which tell us right away who gets the credit in our life.

Would you do me a favor? Would you reach into your pocket or your purse and pull out something of value? Hold it in your hand for a second, Look at it. Who does that belong to? Our society tells us it belongs to you or maybe to the bank. Our law tells us that we are its owners. What does God's Word say? *Deuteronomy 10:14* "Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth

with all that is in it." *Psalm 24:1* "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,¹ the world and those who dwell therein." We are told in *Genesis 2* that God made the world and that He is its author and owner, but He made man and woman His partner, in the world to work it for him and keep it. The seedbed of sin is the belief that we are proprietors of this world rather than partners with God. And as our partner, Jesus Christ gets the credit.

The story goes that there was a very rich man who built a huge house. It was a beautiful house, a marvelous house, a house full of wonders and delights and beauty. But the Builder was lonely in the house. So he invited a few people, people who had no place else to go, to live with him—rent free. All he asked was that they help him love and care for this beautiful house which he had built. But before long the people whom the Builder had invited in began to feel more and more at home. They learned how to work a few of the controls in the house, the lights and the heat, the stove and the television, and some of the mystery and wonder started to wear thin. They began to forget about the Builder entirely. They spread throughout the entire home, breaking the Builder's rules, making a mess, going into rooms where they had not been invited, rifling through closets and leaving them a mess. They began to be embarrassed to admit that they lived in this beautiful home only at the good pleasure of this man whom they now saw only rarely. So they concocted wild fantasies about how the marvelous house came to be built—that it just spontaneously grew from a one room shack. And they began to believe that they themselves were the true owners. One day one of them suggested that they would have a lot more room to live as they liked if they kicked the Builder out entirely. That sounded like a good idea but then someone suggested, "We still don't know entirely how this house works. We may need to have him around to fix things when they go wrong." Everyone agreed to this begrudgingly. Then someone had the brilliant idea that that they could live as they liked if they forced the Builder down into a dark corner of the basement. That way when they needed him for something, he wouldn't be entirely gone and they could still call on him for help.

Isn't this where we find ourselves today? We have created a human-centered world where we have come to believe that we are proprietors of the cosmos, the makers of our own destiny, the titleholder on all within our command. God has largely been confined to the basement. Society has still not banished him entirely, but for many—even many Christians—He has been reduced to a handy tool to bring out when we really need Him—something like a Divine monkey wrench.

N.T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham, England, claims that we have created a human-centered world, saying that we now “Live as if the rumor of God never existed!” “We (act like) we are in charge of our own fate. We are the captains of our souls...spirituality is a private hobby, an up-market version of daydreaming for those who like that kind of thing.”¹

Any god who is optional or simply a tool or a good idea is no god at all. If God is a mere daydream on steroids or a social value on par with good manners or personal hygiene, we are all better off this morning holding a brunch meeting of the Blue Valley Bird Watching Society.

So who is God then? The word the Bible most often uses to describe God is “Lord.” Over 7,000 times the name which the Bible uses to describe God is “Lord”—usually in all capital letters just to enforce the point. God is called “*LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth,*” *Genesis 14:22*. But how do we define “Lord?” Lord is a term we simply don't use much any more—unless we are talking about Jack Lord, the star of Hawaii Five-0 or a British politician. When I need a good definition for a sermon I often turn to my copy of Noah Webster's 1828 American Dictionary on the English Language. Noah Webster defined Lord as “A Master; a person possessing supreme power and authority.” What Webster is missing there, however, is love. The Lord is our master, a person possessing supreme power and authority who uses that power, who employs that authority to sacrificially and unconditionally love His children. Of course Webster also went on define Lord as, “A husband.” The times have changed a little since 1828.

As I close this morning, I want to ask us all a very serious question. “Is God your Lord or is he more like a useful tool, a Divine monkey wrench?” I want to very briefly give us three clues to help us answer.

If God is Lord for us, He will be the one who we trust in tragedy.

I found a great example of this in Tony Dungy's book *Quiet Strength*. Some of you know that Tony Dungy is the coach of the Indianapolis Colts. You may remember that late in the 2005 season, Tony Dungy's teenage son Jamie committed suicide. As ugly as suicide is, Jamie's was even uglier with all the extra media attention. Dungy wrote about that tragedy, “In essence, God is God, and we are not...Why do bad things happen? I don't know why. Why did Jamie die? I don't know. But I do know that God has the answers, I know He loves me, and I know He has a plan—whether it makes sense to me or not.”² Dungy went on to write that, rather than asking “Why?” his trust in the Lord led him to ask “What?” “What can I learn from this, what can I do to help others and give God the glory?” When we trust the Lord even in tragedy, we triumph.

If God is Lord for us, we will not fall to fear. *Psalm 27* teaches us, “*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold¹ of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?² When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.*” This world can be as hard as crucible steel. And it may feel at times like an entire army is camped out against us and that we are alone. But even in this, we should not fear because the LORD is our light and salvation and the stronghold of our life. If we have a problem with fear, the chances are it is because we also have a problem with God's Lordship over our life.

Finally, leading into next week's sermon, if God is Lord for us, He will be the one who we favor with our firstfruits.

When Jen and I were considering coming to the Presbyterian Church of Stanley last year, one of our concerns was selling our home in a slow market. We only owned our home for three-and-a-half years, so we didn't have a whole lot of equity in it. The house across the street had been for sale for eight months. The house next door had been on the market for three-and-a-half months. Our agent prepared us by lowering expectations. But within about fifteen hours after we received the formal invitation from the Pastor Nominating Committee to be your Senior Pastor, and about one hour after I got down on my knees in the sanctuary where I used to preach and prayed to God for confirmation—our agent called me telling me that our house had sold for our full asking price. And I thanked God briefly. But I quickly moved on to congratulating myself on my foresight to buy in the right neighborhood and my choice of paint colors, the rock wall I had built in front of the house, the new sink I installed, the rock porch with the trellis, creeping vines and Japanese holly bushes I put in. Within minutes of the sale I began to calculate just how much we could spend on a new home in Overland Park, just what that new and wonderful home may look like and if the indoor pool could be

full sized or just a lap pool, if the bathroom fixtures would be gold or platinum plated.

It was my wife who jerked me back to reality by suggesting that we tithe on the profit from our home sale. I responded the best way a greedy minister with three advanced degrees in Christian ethics could respond, "I'm not sure that is theologically correct, honey." But she insisted that we give all the credit to our partner, the Lord Jesus Christ, and that we do it with our firstfruits.

Next week, we will talk about just what those firstfruits are.

Amen.

¹ N.T. Wright, p.19.

² Tony Dungy, Quiet Strength, p. 281.