



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Promise Keepers" (Real Faith for Real People Series)

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For four years from around 2006-2010, I was privileged to be one of the speakers for a Men's Ministry called Promise Keepers. The founders of that ministry chose that name because they felt that in order to build up healthy families, men should keep their promises of faithfulness and loyalty to God, their friends, their spouses, and their families. It was a huge movement as men came to grips of what it meant to be serious in terms of their roles. Literally millions of men joined the movement.

I was privileged to address audiences of 50,000 men at the old King Dome in Seattle, the Metrodome in Minneapolis, the Coliseum in Los Angeles, arenas in Sacramento and in Tacoma. To give you a snippet of what I used to do, here I am 10 years ago in Bulldog Stadium in Fresno, California. (Video clip was shown.) In Honolulu I was asked to speak to a full Blaisdell Arena, and some of the men here today were there.

I liked the premise of Promise Keepers. Healthy societies exist if promises are kept, especially if these are promise of protection, love, and loyalty. Marriages and friendships need these promises of protection, love, and loyalty to maintain stability. Trust flourishes best in the context of covenants, commitments, vows, and promises.

Today's Scripture passage is one verse, a powerful verse that, if taken seriously, could transform our relationships:

James 5:12 Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

If we really mean it when we say yes to something or no to something, then we don't need to make outlandish promises of "I swear by God...I swear by heaven... that I'll do it. Really. I promise!"

Just live your life where your yes means yes and your no means no. I like how *The Message*, which is a paraphrase of the entire Bible, elaborates on this verse. It says:

James 5:12 And since you know that He (God) cares, let your language show it. Don't add words like "I swear to God" to your own words. Don't show your impatience by concocting oaths to hurry up God. Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can't be used against you.

Societies need promises because they become the foundation for order and security.

Why did the ancient Hawaiians sail at night using the stars as a guide? They used the constellations because they are like absolutes. You can count on them. At certain times of the year, you know that Orion's Belt is visible at a particular point in the northern sky and that the Big Dipper is over there.

And these constellations always look the same – whether it's Orion's belt, Aquarius, Pegasus, or Ursa Major. Constellations are like God's absolutes in the night sky. They are like the Ten Commandments that are always true and are not to be changed. When the Lord commands that we honor Him, He means all the time, not sometimes. And when the Lord commands us not to steal, and He means never, and not sometimes. When He commands not to lie, He means never, and not sometimes.

Promises are supposed to be like constellations. They need to be secure and dependable.

But when James talks about the importance of our saying yes means yes and our no means no, He is not talking about when you are in a complex business deal where you have to have hundreds of paper to back up your basic promise. This isn't just for legal matters. No, it is just as important for everyday communication with your friend, spouse, classmate, employees, or employer. Healthy friendships, businesses, and marriages are based on covenants upheld.

But unfortunately, it is not easy for many of us to keep our promises. The biggest reason is that we are always hoping for a better deal, so we tend to break the promise in order to have more fun, pleasure, money, or status. Let me explain.

For six and a half years I worked just with singles in a church in California.

I was THE Singles pastor. I was supposed to start a singles department and it took off with thousands of single people attending our events.

But here was the hard part of the ministry – it was hard to get people to commit to attending an event. Why? Because people were always hoping that something better would come up, maybe a better social outing. So it was incredibly hard to plan events with food or having a band to play at a dance because you didn't know if you would have 50 people or 500.

The good part of it is that they did feel their yes was yes and their no a no, so they didn't want to break a promise so they held out. Maybe they would get a date from that guy or gal they were hoping to meet so they kept their calendar open until the last minute.

Now the tough part is that when you actually do say "yes, I will be there" or "yes, I will do that," sometimes something better DOES come along. Now you are in a quandary! Do you break your commitment and go for, what in your mind, is the better deal, even though you would be hurting the feelings of the person you originally said yes to?

And here James, the brother of Jesus, a leader of the early church is coming down strongly on the side of – you stick with the person with whom you came! You don't switch horses in midstream! Once you say yes, make your yes a yes or your no a no.

When we are caught in those times when it seems a better thing has come up, we then start to rationalize and come up with all the reasons why it would be okay to break the promise. "Awww, she didn't really want to go to that event with me anyway," or "He wouldn't mind if I dropped out at the last minute," or "She can always find another date," or "I'll make it up to him somehow."

And maybe some of those reasons are valid, but I think we just have to be careful that we don't live such a self-

centered life that we burn people with whom we have made promises. James is trying to teach us over the centuries that good communities, good fellowships, and good relationships are based on commitments kept.

Think about it. When a person is complimented for being dependable, reliable, responsible, it's because they keep their promises. Good communities are filled with promise keepers. Wouldn't it be great if people had this impression of followers of Christ: "Hey, those people, they keep their promises. Their word is good. I can trust them."

When tempted to break a promise, we need to trust God that maybe in giving up that seemingly more fun thing to do is not God's will and that keeping the promise will make us a better person, or make our business or life better.

I began this sermon talking about the ministry called Promise Keepers. Actually the ministry once put me in an interesting quandary. Year ago, Promise Keepers held an event at the Washington Mall. Something like 1.3 million men showed up. Might have been bigger than the recent Women's March.

I was very honored when they asked me to speak at it. Speaking to more than a million men at one time live and in front of you would be a tremendous opportunity. One could think, "Gee, this would look good on my resumé. I might have higher respect and status, and it would be a super fun challenge that I would like."

But the quandary was that in order to speak, I had to attend a mandatory special meeting. But that weekend was not a good one for me. I had promised my daughter, who I think was around 10 at the time, that we would go to Seattle together for dad-and-daughter time.

I had to speak to a foundation in Seattle, and I had planned to take Noelle with me and before or after the meeting we

would have some days to have meals together and go to the museums and the science exhibition hall, eat at the Space Needle, go out for late night pizza and on and on. I had done that with each of my children – a vacation just with dad.

Same weekend planned as the mandatory pre-requisite meeting for the million-man Promise Keepers event in Washington DC. I suppose that if I told Noelle, "Hey, it's ministry. Big opportunity. Could lead people to Christ, and it's what I do in my job," she might have understood. But I told Promise Keepers that I would not speak at the event, and they could get someone else. I had promised my daughter to be with her.

The organizer of the event pleaded with me to change my mind. I said no. He then said a nice thing – He said, "Our ministry is called Promise Keepers...to keep promises to build healthier families. Thanks for really living it out behind the scenes of what it means to be a real promise keeper." In the very end, I was actually able to go to that million-man event, but I sat on the ground under a tree with the million, and watched another man speak in my place.

I have tried to keep promises as a core value in my life.

I remember when I was living in an apartment during seminary, that I had a lunch date with my elderly neighbor Wayne Lybarger. He was super lonely. And he enjoyed it when I would have a soup lunch with him at a local coffee shop. He looked forward to those times.

One day I was asked to pick up a famous entertainer but it was going to conflict with my lunch date with Wayne. But I knew the lunch would mean so much to Wayne. Sure, I could have chosen another date, but I didn't want him to think he wasn't important. So I chose not to pick up the entertainer and kept my date with Wayne.

Years later Wayne died of cancer, and I felt good that he always knew in his last days that he was loved even though he was older and ill.

Being with a famous entertainer would be a buzz. To speak in front of a million men would be a buzz, but you can't build your life on the buzz. We have to build it on that our word is good. If we say we will be there we will be there; if we say we will pay for it, we pay for it; if we say we will help, we help; if we say we will show up, we show up!

Consider this: Our character is the sum of all the commitments we keep.

Our integrity is the sum of our promises that we follow through on. And when it comes to our faith, we need to first remember ALL OF GOD'S PROMISES to us. Jesus said:

Matt. 11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Matt. 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matt. 11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Or remember when the Bible says:

Rom. 10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Or when the Bible says:

John 15:15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Or when the Bible says this:

1John 4:16 God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

1John 4:19 We love because He first loved us.

Or when Jesus says this:

Matt. 28:20And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We need to depend on Jesus that what He said He meant and He is going to be there for us; that He showed a way for us and our loved ones to be saved; that He is love; that He will always be with us to the end of the age.

That's why we go to healing services. We know He wants to help us emotionally spiritually and physically.

So on one hand we need to depend on what He says. And on the other hand we NEED to stand up for Jesus and keep the promise when we first said we would follow Him and be all in!

Our faith is based on the fact that Jesus kept His promises to us. We sing *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. He gave His life for us. He was beaten for our sake. And if God is going to do that for us, then let's keep our promise to stick with Him and stick up for Him.

Sometimes we are entering into a promise with God and we might not even know it. But when we truly have experienced His grace and mercy, then maybe we might be motivated to make the promise and keep the promise that we will follow Christ – the one who gave His life for us – the one who gave us a second chance.

In the movie *Les Miserables* starring Liam Neeson, we see mercy and the making of a promise in graphic fashion. Let me set up a scene that is the turning point in the life of a man named Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean has been convicted and sent into prison for stealing. He is let out of prison and by the grace and

mercy of a bishop, he stays at the bishop's house. But rather than showing gratitude, Jean Valjean steals the Bishop's silverware to sell to make money. Here is that scene. (Video clip was shown)

Did you hear the line of the Bishop to Jean Valjean that should send chills into our bodies and souls? Let me repeat it: "Don't forget, don't ever forget, you PROMISED to become a new man.

Valjean replies, "Promised? Why are you doing this?"

And the Bishop says: "You no longer belong to evil. With this silver I have bought your soul I have ransomed you from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God."

We were all ransomed or bought with something more than silver – with the life of our Lord Jesus. We can choose to PROMISE today to be a new man, a new woman, and a new child of God. Many of us in this room once said we wanted to follow Christ. We dedicated our lives to Him. We said we would be all in. We accepted Him into our hearts. Jesus hopes that we would then be all in. Jesus died for the cause. Nearly all of the Apostles died for the cause.

Today can we live a life based on the fact that Jesus the ultimate Promise Keeper stood by us and stands by us today. And can we live a life based on our promise that we would dedicate our lives to Him and indeed follow Him to the best of our ability?

So in closing I am going to ask you to do something. I am not going to ask you to stand. Just sit there. I am going to say a prayer to lead some of you to make a promise to dedicate your life to Christ. And then I am going to ask others who a while back once made that promise and today might want to make a renewal of their pledge to follow Christ and really be part of His movement to do good in this world.

Wherever you are in your faith journey as doubter, seeker, or new follower or veteran follower, are you willing to take the next step, a little closer to Christ, more committed, more willing to be all-in?

Let's pray now.

Lord, Jesus, thank You for loving me and for always keeping Your promises. I'm sorry for all my sins, and for all the times I've broken my promises to You and to others. Please help me to stick to what I say and to be a person others can rely on.

I want You in my life, Lord. I accept You as Lord and Savior of my life. I choose to give You the reins of my life. And I accept yOur promise that You will always be with me no matter what. Thank You, Lord. In Your name I pray, Amen.

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