

August 28, 2017

Church Planting
Broken Promises
Acts 18:18-22

Opening words: The end has finally come. During this summer, I promised to preach through Paul's second missionary journey. This morning's scripture lesson completes that task. Next week, Labor Day weekend, I am planning on looking at something new. On Rally Day, September 11, I am going to begin a new six-part sermon called *Christianity and World Religions*. It is a series based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. I looked at world religions several years ago, but the topic has not grown stale. With modern transportation, communication and electronics, our world is getting smaller. The chances of you just knowing Christian people is extremely slim. It is vital that we understand what others believe, but in the end you will be glad you are a Christian. That begins in two weeks, but today we are back in Acts.

This is sermon number forty-three in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. Do you remember my goal? During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I am doing this for one reason. I am hoping to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who created the church in the very beginning and it will be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. Human effort and determination are not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 18:18-22. Let me call this message *Broken Promises*.

Acts 18:18-22 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. ¹⁹ They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. ²¹ But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

Let me begin this message with two questions and a quote. This is the first question: Are you keeping all your promises? This is the second question: Are you keeping the promises you made to God? This is the quote: American businessman Anthony Hitt once said, "*Keep every promise you make and only make promises you can keep.*" If you think you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

Once again, we find ourselves in the eighteenth chapter of Acts. Our reading is straightforward. Our reading begins by telling us that Paul left Corinth and went to Syria. We are told he got a haircut for the occasion. It was not a fashion statement. However, it did symbolize the end of a sacred period for him. Someday we will look at

his haircut in detail. Paul did not travel alone. He was accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Do you remember their story? Like Paul, they were both tentmakers and believers. They parted when they got to Ephesus. As usual, Paul goes into the synagogue and tells them about Jesus. What is unusual about this story is that Paul's words fall on welcoming ears. When Paul tells them that he must leave, they ask him to stay. He leaves, but he promises to come back, God willing. At the end of our reading, Paul finds himself in Caesarea.

The thing that caught my attention in this reading was Paul's promise. He promised to return to Ephesus, God willing. I fell in love with that line because it is just so human. Paul's promise did not stand alone. He made many promises in his life and so do we. Not surprisingly, Paul was as good as his word. He kept his promise. In the very next chapter, chapter nineteen, we learn that Paul did return to Ephesus. Can I ask you a question? Are you as good as your word? Do you live out all your promises? That is not as easy as it sounds. Do you know how many promises an average person makes in a single day? Do you know how many promises a person makes during their lifetime? I don't. I researched it, but I couldn't find an answer. I guess, the Internet is not complete. However, I will say this. A woman who once was a big member here, Nelljane Bailey, once gave me a book called *God's Promises*. That book listed thousands of God's promises. He hasn't broken a single one. It is safe to say, in our lifetime, we have made thousands of promises.

Sociologists tell us we make promises regularly. All of our promises can be grouped into one of three categories. These are the three: **The first kind of promise is a healthy promise.** Those are the promises you make that you fully commit to keep. How many of these promises do you make regularly? You were the class of 1914. You were the home of the fighting Griffins. You won the championship in '13 and you talk about it like it was yesterday. The group meets for breakfast on the second Tuesday of every month. You write it down on your calendar, but it isn't necessary. It is tattooed on your brain because you like that collection of people. They know you are coming because you go every month. You are truly committed to that group. Your participation is a strong, healthy promise. How many strong, healthy promises have you made?

The second kind of promise is a shallow promise. These promises look like a strong, healthy promise, but conditions exist. People make shallow promises to me all the time. I will officiate at a wedding or funeral for an unchurched family. At some level I connect with them. I am sorry to see the occasion end because I know I will never see them again. As we are parting, they express their appreciation and say to me, "What time is your mass? I may show up someday." Do you know how many of those good people have shown up through the years? The answer is close to zero. At the moment they said it they meant it, but something came up to prevent them from coming. The weather was too nice. Their favorite great aunt was getting married again. They had a hard week, so they required another hour of sleep. Shallow promises look

like a strong, healthy promise, but conditions exist. How many shallow promises have you made?

The third kind of promise is a criminal promise. From the moment these promises are made, you have no intention of keeping them. This week I had my annual physical. I am glad to report, I am 100% healthy! My EKG was fine. All my blood work looked good. I was even able to turn my head and cough, and bend over and touch my knees. When my physical came to an end, I sat there on the examination table in my underwear. My doctor said to me, "Russ, everything looks good. However, they would even look better if you would start exercising and lose some weight. Will you promise to lose some weight and start exercising?" In a clear voice I answered, "Yes!" As I was saying, "Yes!" I was thinking, "When donkeys fly". I look good just the way I am. Why fool with perfection☺? From the very beginning, I had no intention of keeping my promise. How many criminal promises have you made? If you will admit you have made at least one criminal promise, say, "**Amen!**"

The promise that Paul made was a healthy promise. He was committed to returning to the Ephesians. Paul was talking to Christian people, who were part of the church. They did not want Paul to return just because they like his personality. They wanted him to return because they wanted to hear more about Jesus. This is the truth. They had a better church with Paul than without Paul. The same is true of us. The vows we make within the church aren't just promises. They are sacred promises and should never be broken. We come to the church to make the most sacred promises of our lives. Indirectly, they are promises made to God. They carry extra weight. How many broken promises have you made to God?

This weekend, I officiated at three weddings. That was a personal high for me. One was here. One was in the Rose Garden in Mill Creek Park. One was in the Saint James Meeting House in Boardman Park. One was on Friday and two were on Saturday. They were all different, yet they were all the same. The core of any wedding ceremony is the vows. Do you remember the vows? Do you remember saying the vows? They go like this:

In the name of God, I take you, to be my husband or wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Most couples don't have clue. They are so caught up in the moment, they don't see the big picture. The promises they are making are eternal. After all, love is not a box of candy or a fist full of flowers. Love is a commitment. The greatest lovers aren't the ones in the white dress and the tuxedo. The greatest lovers are at the hospital. Patiently being together through all the tests and surgeries. They are living out the words they promised, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Can I ask you a question? How

are you doing with that promise? Has anyone here broken that promise? You made that promise before God.

How are you doing with the promise you made at your children's baptism? We do it here regularly. These are the sacred questions and these are the sacred promises:

Do you confess your faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

Do you promise to be an example of holiness before this child? Will you teach the child the Holy Scripture? Will you practice personal and public worship?

Will you bring this child to church until he or she accepts the gift of salvation?

How are you doing with that sacred promise? Don't tell me your children are old and you are liberated from the task. Your children, regardless of their age, regardless of your age, still need you. When was the last time you talked to them about Jesus? When was the last time you prayed for their spiritual maturity? When was the last time you prayed for your children's salvation? How are you doing with the promise you made at your children's baptism? Has anyone here broken that promise? You made that promise before God.

How are you doing with the promise you made when you joined the church? It is not my custom, but in many churches you must make a promise. People hate to stand in front of the crowd, but maybe we should do it. In the perfect church, everyone is accountable to everyone else. If you are a member of this church, then you have made a promise to uphold this church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness. If everyone prayed for this church as much as you, would this ministry expand or contract? If everyone came to church as much as you come to church, would our attendance figures go up or down? If everyone financially supported this church the way you financially support this church, would our ministry expand or would we go bankrupt? If everyone worked as hard as you at this church, would our ministry benefit, or be crippled? If everyone talked about Jesus as much as you, would Jesus be promoted in this community, or would we be confused with just another social club? How are you doing with the promise you made when you joined this church? Has anyone here broken that promise? You made that promise before God.

In this election year, let me tell you this election story. One hundred years ago, in the 1916 Presidential election, President Woodrow Wilson was running against Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. During Wilson's first four years, war had broken out in Europe. Our country was fixated on that war, and emotionally sided with the Allies. However, many did not want our country to take military action. Wilson knew how many felt, and promised during the campaign to keep America out of the war. His

campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." Do you remember your American history? Months after winning the election, Wilson changed his tune. He went to Congress to approve a declaration of war. He got what he wanted. The United States entered World War One and 53,513 Americans died in battle. Many historians consider Woodrow Wilson one of the greatest liars in American history. From that moment on, his word meant nothing. He broke his promise. How are you doing with your promises? How are you doing with the promises you made to God? American businessman Anthony Hitt once said, "*Keep every promise you make and only make promises you can keep.*"

Will you pray with me?