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WHEN CHRISTIANS COMPROMISE WITH THE WORLD

2 Chronicles 17-20

By

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Kings of Judah Lesson 3

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A man's greatest strengths are often also the source of his greatest weaknesses. A man who has strong convictions, who speaks out boldly for God's truth, if he's not careful can become harsh or unkind. On the other hand, a man oozing with love and compassion can err by tolerating everything and everyone, thus compromising God's truth. The latter error seems to me to be the more common danger in the church. Often, in the name of love and out of the desire to promote unity, Christians have compromised with the world.

For example, the world's most famous evangelist, Billy Graham, whose personal integrity is impeccable and whose preaching proclaims the gospel, at the same time, out of a sincere desire to reach the widest possible audience, has often invited men of liberal theology and famous people who are at best immature Christians to participate in his crusades. This leaves the impression that there is no substantial difference, theologically or morally, between what Graham proclaims and what these people represent. Some would defend Graham by saying, "Look at all the people who get saved!" But our standard always needs to be, "Is it biblical?" not, "Does it work?" And by way of long-term results, Scripture is clear: Any compromise with the world, whether in doctrine, morals, or relationships, has disastrous consequences.

The story of Jehoshaphat is about a godly, good king with a major weakness for compromise with the world. We learn that

Compromise with the world brings disastrous
consequences to God's people.

The outward damage may not be apparent for a while. But just as driving your car on salted roads in the winter brings inevitable, although not immediate, damage to your car, so compromise with the world brings inevitable corruption into your life and into the church. Four observations from the story of Jehoshaphat:

1. Compromise with the world is a danger for even the most godly of believers.

Clearly Jehoshaphat was a godly man (note 2 Chron. 17:3-4, 6). He sought the Lord and walked in His commandments. He took great pride in the ways of the Lord and removed idols from the land. He sent out teachers to instruct the people in God's law (17:7-9). When a prophet rebuked him for his wrongful alliance with Ahab, unlike his father (16:10), Jehoshaphat accepted it and went on to institute further religious reforms (19:2-11). In chapter 20 we see his heart as the nation is threatened by a vast army, and he calls the people to prayer and fasting. Jehoshaphat's prayer before the assembly (20:6-12) reveals his humble trust in the Lord.

The point is, Jehoshaphat was not your average, run-of-the-mill believer. He was a man of strong faith and open godliness who courageously brought reform to the nation. And if *he* suffered from the danger of compromising with the world, then none of us is exempt.

Please note: In pointing out Jehoshaphat's problem with wrongful contact with the world, the Bible doesn't condemn everything the man did, but rather it portrays his strengths and his weaknesses (19:2-3). I say this because some will hear what I said about Billy Graham and wrongly conclude that I'm completely throwing out the man and his ministry. People have concluded the same thing when I've pointed out some of the errors in the teaching of James Dobson. But I'm not doing that and the Bible doesn't do that either. I'm simply pointing out that these men who obviously have a heart for God also have some areas where they are wrong and that if God's people follow them in those wrong areas, there will be serious consequences down line.

Why did Jehoshaphat and why do we fall into the problem of compromise with the world?

2. Compromise with the world is a danger because of its subtlety.

The first thing we read of Jehoshaphat (17:1-2) is how he strengthened his position over Israel (Ahab's northern kingdom). Later we read of his valiant army and fortified cities (17:12-19). He was ready for any onslaught. If Ahab had declared war, Jehosha-

phat would have creamed him! But instead Ahab finagled to get his daughter married to Jehoshaphat's son. The next thing we hear is Jehoshaphat promising the godless Ahab, "I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will be with you in the battle" (18:3)! Incredible! It's as if a boxer has trained for the big fight and his opponent invites him out for dinner and slips poison into his coffee.

That's how Satan works. He's not usually frontal; he's tricky. He fools you with ostensibly good causes and lures you into his den.

Why did Jehoshaphat get entangled with Ahab? Jehoshaphat was one of the most godly kings ever to reign in Judah, and Ahab was one of the most despicable snakes ever to coil on the throne of Israel. Why did they get together?

The text doesn't give much of a clue (18:1), but we can surmise that due to Jehoshaphat's power it was to Ahab's advantage to become allies. So Ahab probably sought the alliance. Remember, Jehoshaphat was a nice guy. And he probably thought how good it would be to reunite the southern and northern kingdoms. So he gave his son in marriage to Ahab's daughter. It was for a good cause! Maybe the boy would have a positive influence on Athaliah and her mother, Jezebel! Sure!

A few years later, Jehoshaphat went down to Ahab's capital, Samaria. Ahab rolled out the red carpet. After they had gorged themselves on Ahab's food, the crafty varmint proposed a "spiritual" project to Jehoshaphat: "Will you go up with me against Ramoth-Gilead?" (18:3). Ramoth-Gilead was one of the cities of refuge ordained by God. It had fallen into the hands of the king of Syria. What could be more right than to go against this pagan king to recapture this city for the Lord and His people? So Jehoshaphat pledged his allegiance to Ahab. It almost got him killed!

That's how Satan ensnares believers. He's not up-front about the disastrous consequences of compromise with the world. He makes it look good. He makes it seem wholesome and even right. Satan doesn't approach you, young ladies, and ask, "Would you like to marry this drunken pagan bum who will abuse you and your children and make your life a living hell?" You're ready for that:

“Put your dukes up, Satan!” Instead he presents you with a nice young man. He treats you right. He’s just what you’ve always wanted--well, with one little exception: He’s not a committed Christian. But he attends church with you, and he’s promised to let you raise the kids in the faith.

Satan doesn’t walk up, pitchfork in hand, and ask with a diabolical grin, “How would you like to become a drunk or a dope addict? You’ll become a thief and a liar to support your habit, you’ll ruin your health, you won’t be able to hold down a job, you’ll shred your relationships with your family. Wanna sign up?”

Instead he says, “Hey, you need to relax and feel good. You’re under a lot of pressure. Your friends are all doing it. Don’t spoil the fun. Smoke a joint, pop a pill, take that drink!” And he ensnares you.

He doesn’t come up and say, “How would you like to get venereal disease or have a baby out of wedlock, or maybe kill one through abortion?” Or, “How would you like to destroy two families by committing adultery?” Rather, he says, “Sex is exciting! You’re in love! How can it be wrong if it feels so right?”

That’s how even godly people get lured into compromise with the world--through subtlety. How does it work?

3. Compromise with the world sucks you in through wrong relationships.

Notice how Jehoshaphat got sucked in deeper and deeper. First he gave his son in marriage, probably for a good cause (to reunite the two kingdoms). Next he accepted Ahab’s hospitality and foolishly gave his word about going into battle. But at that point his conscience was nagging him, and so he asked for a prophet so that they could inquire of the Lord. But even after the godly Micaiah prophesied against Ahab’s expedition, Jehoshaphat felt locked in--he had given his word. And so he stood by while the godly prophet was hauled off to jail. His conscience must have been shouting at this point, but he had given his word!

Next (this was a real no-brainer!) he naively agreed to Ahab’s scheme where Jehoshaphat would wear his kingly robes into battle, while Ahab went incognito. Christians are generally trusting people. When they start running with the world, they get outsmarted real

quick! And so Jehoshaphat went into battle with the godless Ahab against the word of God's prophet. Except for God's grace he would have been killed!

We get lured by the subtlety of the world and then we get locked in by forming wrong relationships that get us entangled even deeper. Jehoshaphat's experience reveals several areas where we as believers must be on guard against forming wrong relationships:

(1) Wrong *marriage* relationships--The Bible is clear that it is sin for a believer to enter a marriage with an unbeliever. "Do not be bound together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14; see 1 Cor. 7:39). Most often it seems to be a Christian girl who falls in love with a nice non-Christian guy (they're all nice!). I've had girls tell me that they've prayed about it and feel a peace that God will bring the man to Christ. Besides, if she drops him, she won't be able to witness to him! It's incredible how Christians will rationalize their disobedience even though it's going to plunge them into terrible heartache! It's never God's will for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. (If you're already married to an unbeliever, God's will is that you remain married and live a godly life--1 Cor. 7:12-16.)

(2) Wrong *social* relationships--In this area you must be very careful. If Jehoshaphat had not been there enjoying Ahab's hospitality, he wouldn't have been so ready to join Ahab on his military expedition. It is not wrong and is, in fact, right to form social relationships with unbelievers for the purpose of leading them to faith in Christ. Jesus was a friend of sinners in that sense. But you must be clear on your purpose, and you must not compromise your standards as a follower of Jesus Christ. "Do not be deceived," Paul warns. "Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Note 2 Chronicles 19:2: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?" Many Christians would answer, "Of course we should!" You'd better read your Bible more carefully! It says that God hates the wicked (Ps. 5:5) and that we should too (Ps. 139:20-22)! You say, "Wait a minute, doesn't God love everyone and aren't we supposed to love the sinner but hate the sin?" Suffice it to say here that the Bible is a bit more cautious and discerning than most Christians. Jude 23 says that on some, we are to "have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the

flesh." You should not form primary friendships with unbelievers. Your closest friends must be those who share your values and goals in Christ. "What fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). Answer: None!

(3) Wrong *spiritual* relationships--Jehoshaphat finds himself lined up with 400 false prophets against the lone prophet of God. How do you think Jehoshaphat felt as he watched this godly prophet boldly speak for God and then get hit in the face and get thrown in prison while Jehoshaphat marched off to battle on Ahab's side?

I often hear Christians say that Jesus said the world would know we are His disciples by our love and unity, so we need to bury our doctrinal differences and proclaim our unity and common ground. The current push is even to break down barriers between Catholics and Protestants, as if there were no significant differences. Certainly, Protestants have often divided over petty issues, and that is sin. But, core theological issues mean the difference between heaven and hell! Some denominations are so spiritually corrupt that we cannot join with them in any cooperative sense without tarnishing the name of our Savior. "Love" that compromises cardinal truth is not biblical love.

(4) Wrong *political* relationships--Although our political system is not parallel to the situation in the text, there is a warning here for us as Christian citizens. As soon as Jehoshaphat entered into this military pact with Ahab, he lost his position of strength. Now he was committed to go into battle with a godless man who operated on different principles than he did. He had to work under Ahab's scheme in the battle. It almost cost him his life.

As believers, we may find it helpful at times to link up politically with unbelievers to achieve some common goal (such as pro-life or pro-family legislation). But we need to think it through very carefully and keep our goals and methods clearly in view. Some Christians in America are getting carried away with the political process, as if that is the answer to preserving our freedoms. While I am not disparaging our political responsibility as Christian citizens, I do maintain that the only hope for America is the gospel. We dare not forget it! Wrong political relationships can suck us into compromise with the world.

(5) Wrong *business* relationships--Jehoshaphat didn't learn his lesson with Ahab and so he entered into a shipbuilding venture with Ahab's son Ahaziah. The author pointedly states that this was a wicked deed on Jehoshaphat's part. The Lord judged him by destroying all the ships (20:35-37).

Many Christians never think of applying 2 Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers," to business ventures. But the text does not stipulate marriage or any single area. It certainly applies to business relationships. If you get into a business partnership with an unbeliever, his goal is to make money, preferably as easily as possible. Your goal is to honor Christ (or it *should* be!). You want to be honest and upright; he wants to cut corners if need be. It won't work. You'll end up compromising with the world.

If you were already in a business relationship with unbelievers when you came to Christ, then you need to give clear testimony to your partner of your new faith in Christ. Also you need to let him know that you plan now to obey God in your business, even if it means less profit. You may need to begin prayerfully planning a way out of the partnership. You especially need to be careful not to wrong any person in the way you get out of a wrong business alliance. It took time to get into the partnership, and it probably will take time to get out.

We have seen that compromise with the world is a great danger even for the most godly of believers. It is subtle; and it ensnares us through wrong relationships.

4. Compromise with the world brings disastrous results.

It may take time, but sin always has its consequences. Sometimes the consequences affect future generations more than our own. But if you sow compromise with the world, you won't reap God's blessings. Jehoshaphat himself, apart from God's grace, would have lost his life in battle. He later did lose financially in his ungodly business alliance with Ahab's son.

Furthermore, Jehoshaphat's sin affected God's people. He did not say merely "I am as you are," but also, "and my people as your people" (18:3). When Jehoshaphat went into war alongside Ahab, the army of Judah went with him, and no doubt some lost their

lives. Probably others in Judah would look at the godly Jehoshaphat's friendship with the evil Ahab and say, "There must not be much difference between Ahab's religion and ours. Surely, if there was any big difference, such a good man as Jehoshaphat wouldn't be so friendly with him." We never sin alone. Our sin always affects others in the body of Christ, especially the sins of a leader.

In addition, Jehoshaphat's sin helped the enemies of God in their wickedness (19:2). What if Ahab had won? Would he have fallen on his face before God? Hardly! He would have thanked his godless prophets and continued in his evil ways, thanks to Jehoshaphat. We never help sinners by compromising our standards to help them accomplish their purposes.

The clincher of this story is the devastating effect that Jehoshaphat's compromise with the world had on his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and on the whole southern kingdom. In chapters 21 and 22 we read that after Jehoshaphat's death, his son Jehoram (married to Athaliah) slaughtered all his brothers and then turned the nation to idolatry (see 21:6). God struck him with a terrible disease of the bowels and he died after eight years in office. His son Ahaziah became king and lasted one year before he was murdered (see 22:3-4). Ahaziah's wicked mother Athaliah then slew all his sons (her own grandsons!), except for Joash (a one-year-old) who was rescued and hidden from her. The Davidic kingly line from which Christ was descended came that close to being snuffed out! And then the wicked Athaliah ruled the land for six years. All this was the result of Jehoshaphat's compromise with the wicked Ahab!

Conclusion

One of the most significant books I read last year was David Wells' *No Place for Truth* (Or "Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?") [Eerdmans]. He argues convincingly that the evangelical church in America has lost its theological foundation, its God-centeredness. Instead of being "truth brokers" who help their flocks come to know and live in submission to the holy God, pastors have become business managers who market the church and psychologists who help people find personal fulfillment and good feelings. He points out how if the Apostle Paul were looking for a pastorate today, he might be hard pressed because few would warm

to his personality and, "... most pastors stand or fall today by their personalities rather than their character" (p. 290). He argues that the church has blended in with "modernity," promoting God and the gospel as just another self-help method.

I wish you all would read *No Place for Truth* and its sequel, *God in the Wasteland* (which I just began reading this week). But since I know that won't happen, I've told you this much so you will understand more about how and why I operate as I do. I'm not here to employ the latest proven church growth techniques to build this church or to share the latest psychological insights to help you feel better about yourself. You may not even like my personality (although I hope you do!). My aim is to walk with God, to follow His Word of truth, and to help you do the same.

So often we, as God's people, are like fish swimming in the ocean of this world, not even realizing that we're wet! My function as a biblical pastor is to help my flock come into submission to the God who has revealed Himself in His Word--in your thinking, from which all else flows (that's why right theology is so crucial!); in your personal and family lives (godly living has to begin there); and in your public lives (how we relate to this godless culture without being conformed to it). I conclude with Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 12:1-2 from *The Message* [NavPress]:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Discussion Questions

1. What is “worldliness”? Is it mainly outward or inward?
2. How can you maintain the goal of evangelism without becoming either wrongly entangled or manipulative in your relationships with unbelievers?
3. How can you know where to draw lines of separation from professing Christians?
4. Should we ever set aside truth for the sake of unity?

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