

“Stiff-necked”
Exodus 33:1-7
(Preached at Trinity, May 24, 2009)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Israel had survived their gross fall into idolatry. Three thousand were slain by the sword. God also sent a great plague upon them, the full extent not being revealed unto us. But God had not utterly consumed them. By God’s rich mercy He withheld His full wrath from them.
 2. It was not because of their goodness that they were not destroyed. God remembered His covenant. God would give Israel Canaan because of the Covenant He had made with their fathers
Exodus 33:1 – “Depart, *and* go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land which I swore unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, Unto thy seed will I give it.”
 3. They must have rejoiced when they heard this good news. They would still inherit the land flowing with milk and honey. But then they heard something that must have been like a red hot poker in their ears. **Exodus 33:3** “I will not go up in the midst of thee” God would not go with them!
 4. This is the truth that should cause all men to tremble. Sin separates us from God.
Isaiah 59:2 – “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid *his* face from you, that he will not hear.”
 5. The news that they had lost the presence of God caused great mourning. As a sign of their distress they refused to put on any of the ornaments of jewelry.
 6. God explains their problem.
Exodus 33:3 – “for thou *art* a stiffnecked people”
Stiff-necked – like a stubborn plow animal. An ox’s head must be turned in order for him to turn. A stiff-necked animal is difficult to turn.
 7. God’s charge to Israel was simple. Turn from the idolatry that you embraced in Egypt. Turn from the evil that has polluted your life and turn to Me. Embrace My Law. But they would not turn.
 8. Tonight I want to examine what it means to be stiff-necked. We’ll look at it under two headings. The stiff-necked unbeliever; the stiff-necked believer.
- I. All of humanity is stiff-necked towards God
- A. God has been merciful and kind to mankind – He woe men to turn to Him
 1. First by his goodness great patience
 - a. God had been good to Israel. He delivered them from Egypt, defended them at the Red Sea, provided them with water to drink and manna to eat. His presence was with them. He continued in covenant relationship with them. His goodness should have caused them to respond in steadfast faithfulness and obedience. But they were stiff-necked.

- b. God has poured His goodness and mercy upon all men. He has filled the world with richness, beauty, companionship, resources.
 - c. For a fallen world the human experience is full of pleasure
 - d. For any reasonable person God's goodness and mercy would result in great gratitude – But the lost man is not filled with gratitude
Romans 1:21 – “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”
 - e. Any reasonable man would turn to God in submission forsaking his sinful rebellion.
Romans 2:4 – “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”
 - f. The word for “despisest” refers to holding something in contempt or of low esteem – to think little of something.
In other words, God in all His goodness is not worthy of our attention and respect. It is because we *will not* turn – stiff-necked
2. Second God woos men through His Law
 - a. God has written His Law upon the hearts of all men – all men have a conscience that convicts us of our sin
 - b. The Law is designed to show us our sinfulness before God
Galatians 3:24 – “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”
 3. Israel was stiff-necked and their stubbornness had separated them from God. Notice in **Verse 1** – the estrangement. “the people” instead of “My people.”
- B. God graciously commands all men to repent
1. God offers mercy if we turn from sin and turn to Christ
Ezekiel 18:21 – “But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die.”
Ezekiel 18:32 – “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn *yourselves*, and live ye.’
 2. The tragedy is we will not turn. The lost man suppresses God's kind overtures. He is stiff-necked
Romans 1:18 – “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;” (*lit. suppress the truth*)
 3. Stephen preaching to the Jews described the hearts of all men.
Acts 7:51 – “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do ye*.”
- C. The problem with Israel was the problem with all men. We have corrupt hearts. We are in need of a transforming work of God's grace.
Deuteronomy 10:16 – “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”

We are not surprised by this. We know that lost humanity is hardened towards God.

- II. The most tragic thing is that sometimes we as believers are stiff-necked
- A. God demands that we keep our eyes fixed resolutely upon Him
1. He demands us to walk the narrow road of holiness
 2. He demands that we find our sole contentment in Him
 3. He demands that we be submit to His gracious leadership being led as He would lead us being conformed more and more to Christ.
 4. The yoke of Christ is a gentle yoke, an easy yoke
Matthew 11:29-30 – “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.
³⁰ For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.”
- B. Sadly, sometimes God’s own people are stiff-necked. I’ve said many times, the Christian life is a conflict of delights. We are stiff-necked when we begin to seek this world as our delight.
1. God demands that we delight in Him
Psalm 37:4 – “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.”
 2. God demands that we delight in His Law
Psalm 1:1-2 – “Blessed *is* the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. ² But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”
Psalm 40:8 – “I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law *is* within my heart.”
Psalm 119:47 – “And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved.”
 3. God even tells us to delight in His day
Isaiah 58:13-14 thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from* doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking *thine own* words: ¹⁴ Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.
- C. Why do we seek delights in the things of this world – because we are stif-necked
- III. What are the consequences of being stiff-necked?
- A. God removes His fellowship with us
1. There is a difference between *union* and *communion*
 - a. Our union with God is sovereign and unalterable
 - b. Our communion with God is alterable – it can be affected by our actions
 2. Sin can cause the Holy Spirit to remove His gracious influences
Isaiah 59:2 - “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid *his* face from you, that he will not hear.”

3. Sin can hinder our ability to approach God's throne in prayer
Psalm 66:18 – "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."
 4. 1689 LBC **CHAPTER 5; OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE**
Paragraph 5. "The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does often times leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy ends. So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good."
- B. God's chastening comes in many forms
1. Because God loves us with the love of a Father to His children He will not allow us to turn from Him.
 2. His chastening hand is a token of His Divine love
Proverbs 3:11-12 – "My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: ¹² For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son *in whom* he delighteth."
 3. God's rod is designed to humble us and turn our stiff-necks back towards God
 4. Chastening is a blessing
Psalm 94:12 – "Blessed *is* the man whom thou chastenest, O LORD, and teachest him out of thy law;"
Hebrews 12:11 – "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."
- C. Sin always draws us away from God
1. When we are in sin Christ ceases to be our chief desire, our highest interest.
 - a. When we are in sin we are hindered from entering into the presence of God
 - b. We are also hindered because our own desire is weakened.
 2. Sin is poison to our relationship with Christ. It hinders our prayer life. It crushes our confidence. It acts like water on the fires of our fervency. It separates us from fellowship with God.
Isaiah 59:1-2 – "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: ² But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid *his* face from you, that he will not hear."

- IV. God has provided the Christian a means of dealing with sin - Repentance.
- A. Israel removed their ornaments as a symbolic sign of repentance.
1. Pink – “The removal of their ornaments was for the purpose of evidencing the genuineness of their contrition. Outward adornment was out of keeping with the taking of a low place before God.”
 2. They truly grieved over the loss of God’s presence. They hadn’t lost the Promised land. They had lost the presence of God and they were smitten with grief.
Do you grieve when God is not near?
- B. The casting away of their jewelry might have also been a sign of their forsaking of their idols.
1. Remember, the golden calf was created from their jewelry.
 - a. Before they stripped off their jewelry in order to worship a false god. Now they were tearing off their jewelry in order to worship the one true God.
 - b. Later they would offer the same gold to God for the building of the Tabernacle.
Exodus 35:22 – “And they came, both men and women, as many as were willing hearted, *and* brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold: and every man that offered *offered* an offering of gold unto the LORD.”
 - c. True repentance demands the casting away of our idols.
 2. We must understand that sin hinders our fellowship with God.
James 4:6 – “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
 3. We must be willing to part with our idols, to part with whatever hinders our relationship with Christ. How we manage our wealth says much about our spirituality. How do you spend your money? What place do your possessions have in your life?

Conclusion:

1. What is your chief desire? As believers our highest interest should be our relationship with God. Jesus must be our highest desire. Do you love Him more than you love His blessings.
2. What do you desire?
What is your highest goal? Does your life demonstrate your answer?
3. Do you savor rich fellowship with Christ? Do you understand the effect of sin on this fellowship?
4. Sin will hinder your pursuit of Christ. Oh may He be your chief desire and your true love.