

Joshua 23:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left;

Analysis

Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left; That ye come not among these nations, these that remain among you; neither make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause to swear by them, neither serve them, nor bow yourselves unto them:

Joshua redefines courage—not as military bravery but as covenant faithfulness. The command "be very courageous" (chazaqtem me'od, תְּחִזְקֵתֶם) uses the same verb God spoke to Joshua (1:6-9), but here applied to keeping the law rather than fighting enemies. This reveals that the greatest courage required isn't facing human armies but resisting cultural compromise and religious syncretism. Standing firm against subtle cultural accommodation requires more sustained courage than one-time military heroism.

The phrase "turn not aside... to the right hand or to the left" uses language from Deuteronomy 5:32 and 28:14, describing total obedience without deviation, addition, or subtraction. Reformed theology's regulative principle of worship applies this standard: churches must worship as God commands, neither omitting required elements (turning left) nor adding unauthorized innovations (turning right). The narrow path (Matthew 7:14) requires precision—deviating toward legalism or license both lead to destruction.

The specific warning against making "mention of the name of their gods" addresses how subtly compromise begins. Joshua doesn't merely warn against worshiping Canaanite deities (that would be obvious apostasy) but against even casual mention of their names—acknowledging their existence, discussing them as viable alternatives, or treating them with respect rather than contempt (Exodus 23:13). This teaches that compromise begins not with outright rejection of God but with entertaining alternatives, with treating false religion as legitimate option rather than dangerous delusion deserving denunciation.

Historical Context

The command "come not among these nations" (lavo ba'goyim ha'eleh, לֹבֵא בָּגּוּיִם הָאֶלְהָה) literally means "do not enter among these nations," prohibiting social integration that would lead to religious assimilation. Ancient Near Eastern culture was intensely religious—every social interaction involved some religious dimension. Business contracts invoked patron deities, marriages celebrated with pagan rituals, festivals honored Canaanite gods. To "come among" these nations meant inevitable exposure to and pressure toward participation in pagan practices.

The progression Joshua outlines—mentioning their gods' names, swearing by them, serving them, bowing to them—describes a typical declension from toleration to adoption. Each step seems minor: acknowledging Baal exists, using common oaths invoking other deities, participating in community festivals, and finally actual worship. This pattern appears repeatedly in Judges as Israel gradually absorbed Canaanite religion. The warning proved tragically prescient—Israel's failure to maintain separation led to the syncretism that eventually brought divine judgment and exile.

Archaeological evidence from Iron Age Israel confirms religious syncretism was constant temptation. Excavations at various sites have uncovered Canaanite religious objects in Israelite contexts—Asherah poles, fertility figurines, altars to Baal—demonstrating that Joshua's concerns were well-founded. The Israelites did intermix with Canaanites (Judges 3:5-6), did intermarry (Judges 3:6), and did

worship their gods (Judges 2:11-13), producing the covenant violations Joshua foresaw and warned against.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does Joshua's redefinition of courage from military valor to covenant faithfulness challenge our contemporary understanding of Christian courage?
2. What subtle compromises with cultural values (our equivalent of "mentioning gods' names") might lead to eventual full embrace of anti-Christian worldviews?
3. How can we maintain cultural engagement necessary for evangelism while avoiding the religious/moral syncretism Joshua warns against?

Interlinear Text

כִּי אַתָּה יְלָעֵשׂ וְתַּעֲשֵׂה מְאֹד יְתִחְזֹקְתָּם
courageous Be ye therefore very to keep and to do H853 H3605
H2388 H3966 H8104 H6213

סֹור לְבָلְתָּה וְמִשְׁמַר הַתּוֹךְ תְּבַנֵּה בְּסַפָּר הַקְּתָב וְ
all that is written in the book of the law of Moses that ye turn H1115 H5493
H3789 H5612 H8451 H4872

וְשִׁמְעָאֹל: יְמִינְךָ מִמֶּנָּךָ
not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left H8040
H4480 H3225

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 28:14 (Word): And thou shalt not go aside from any of the words which I command thee this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

Deuteronomy 5:32 (Parallel theme): Ye shall observe to do therefore as the LORD your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

Hebrews 12:4 (Parallel theme): Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

Deuteronomy 12:32 (Parallel theme): What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

Deuteronomy 17:20 (Word): That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.
