

Why has commitment become a dirty word?

October 12, 2008 - Psalm 57

There's a new dirty word in town. It's not one you'll hear in a curse or scrawled on an overpass. It's not even a four letter word. It actually has 10 letters. But mention this word and people scatter. Phone lines go dead. Eyes glaze over. Walls go up. Excuses form in the mind.

What is this dreaded dirty word? Commitment! A commitment is "a responsibility; something that takes up time or energy, especially an obligation." Commitment involves "loyalty or devotion to a cause, person or relationship." Commitment used to be a widely held value.

But as one author notes, "Many people today are simply not good at commitments of any kind. . . . It is the mood of the times. Commitment means responsibility and responsibility sounds confining." It's understandable why we hesitate to commit. We are bombarded by constant demands for our commitment. "Will you commit to vote for our party on Tuesday? For a commitment of just 200\$ a month, you can begin to enjoy the benefits of a Hot Tub for the

winter. Young guys and girls struggle to define their relationship. Is it committed or open where they are free to see other people? Or ministry leaders ask "Will you commit to help out with this event?" "Mmm, I don't know." "Well will you commit to come to the event?" "Mmm, we'll see what else is happening. I might be there."

Caution to commit is wise when it comes to questionable pitches or characters. And many struggle with over commitment that comes with the busyness of our lives. But has our society's anti-commitment slant resulted in more freedom or produced more benefits. Could it be that commitment to something valuable actually leads to freedom? Another author writes, "We gain freedom in anything through commitment, discipline and fixed habit. . . . Freedom is the product of discipline and commitment." If we want to be free to run up the hill from the Sturgeon Valley to the hospital, we have to be committed to building up physical stamina through regular running. If we want to be free to master a course or topic, we must commit to studying it and investing in it. If we want to be free to have healthy relationships, both parties in a relationship must commit to making it work.

This brings us to our question today. If you were to rate yourself on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being high and 1 being low, how committed are we to a healthy, growing relationship with God? Have we allowed the anti-commitment disease to lessen our passion for God? If we discover, we're not where we need to be, what might be going on? It might reveal a deficit in knowing God. We might hesitate to commit fully to the Lord because we don't know Him that well. Or we may hesitate because we seek ultimate satisfaction apart from God. When we seek satisfaction apart from God and outside His loving boundaries, we will hesitate to commit fully to Him.

So we are here to ponder any commitment deficit we might have towards God this morning. You might ask, "I thought we were doing a series on prayer?" This is part of that series. We've spent four messages on internal issues in prayer. We learned about simple prayer which involves acknowledging God is God and embracing our role as His dependent children. Then we looked at confessional prayer and our need to confess our sins to ensure there are no barriers between God and us. Two weeks ago, we learned the prayer of giving up control through Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemane. Last week,

we looked at how we can respond when God says no – by trusting Him and looking for His yes. All these prayers are important and get us started in prayer.

But if we are going to grow in prayer and in our relationship with the Lord, we must regularly pray. You'll notice a lot of the prayers we looked at occur when there is some crisis. We have to give up control. Some sin has been exposed and needs confession. Or we realize God has said no and we have to adjust. If we only come to God in prayer during crisis, we won't grow in prayer or in Him. Our prayers will remain focused on ourselves.

Next week we start the second phase of this series. We're going to broaden our prayer focus from **looking in** to **looking up**. We're going to start looking more at the one we pray to. Learn prayer that is for giving God glory. Then after Christmas we're going to **look out** and examine prayer for others. To engage in that kind of praying requires that we regularly deal with our internal stuff and go deeper with God in the ordinary days of life.

That requires commitment. So at the end of this message, we're aiming to engage in a prayer of commitment to the Lord. We're going

to ask the Lord for His strength to change or adjust our lives to incorporate regular prayer. But since we live in a society where commitment seems to be a dirty word. So we need to address the lack of knowledge about God that may prevent us from committing fully to Him. In addressing that deficit, I suspect our passion to find our deepest satisfaction in the Lord will greatly increase.

We're going to learn more about God's great character today through someone who had every worldly reason to abandon commitment to the Lord. He was in the middle of a whole whack of trouble. Yet, he could declare "My heart is steadfast, O Lord, my heart is steadfast." I'm committed to you wholeheartedly. How did he get there? How could he do that? Let's find out in psalm 57.

Psalm 57 NIV

For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A miktam . When he had fled from Saul into the cave.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,
for in you my soul takes refuge.
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed.

² I cry out to God Most High,
to God, who fulfills {his purpose} for me.

³ He sends from heaven and saves me,
rebuking those who hotly pursue me; Selah
God sends his love and his faithfulness.

⁴ I am in the midst of lions;
I lie among ravenous beasts—
men whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.

⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.

⁶ They spread a net for my feet—
I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path—
but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah

⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.

⁸ Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.

⁹ I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.

¹⁰ For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.

David was a shepherd boy most famous for slaying Goliath. King Saul of Israel was very grateful for David's contribution to that great victory. He put David in charge of armies and he won many victories. But then Saul began to hear people praise David more than him. Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him to protect the throne. God had already revealed to David that he would one day be king of Israel. But for many years, David was pursued by Saul and his

men forcing David to become an outcast and live on the fringe. The title this Psalm comes from that time includes a description of the setting. David fled from Saul into a cave. We would expect David to despair. But David focuses instead on God's character.

Now the NIV translates the last phrase of verse 3 as "love and faithfulness." The English Standard Version translates it "steadfast love and faithfulness. We learned about God's steadfast love in our study of Psalm 51. Remember David's confessional prayer there? "Have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love. We learned steadfast love is "hesed" in Hebrew. It occurs 240 times in the Old Testament. It contains 3 basic components which constantly interact – strength, commitment and love. So God's steadfast love describes Him as one deeply, strongly and loyally committed to his people.

Characteristic #1 of God In verse 1, **David shows confidence in God's mercy towards him.** "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy." It's the same phrase he would use in later years to begin Psalm 51. David doubly appeals to God's mercy. David does not

deny the desperation of his situation. He is in a cave and hotly pursued. He cries out for mercy from God in heaven. God's mercy means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress.

Throughout the Bible, God's mercy flows out. "The two blind men who wish Jesus to see their plight and heal them cry 'Have mercy on us, Son of David.'" (Matt. 9:27). When Paul speaks of the fact that God comforts us in affliction, He calls God the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort. (2 Cor. 1:3). In time of need, we are told to draw near God's throne so that we might receive both mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16). And we are to imitate God's mercy in our conduct towards others: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'" (Matt. 5:7). Here David appeals to that mercy in his time of great need.¹ Then David moves on to a second characteristic of God.

Characteristic #2 of God - David trusts God as His great protector. "For in you my soul takes refuge, I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings." This is a double image of God's protective presence- refuge for the soul, refuge under God's wings. A refuge is a place protected from the storm. Coastlines often have places called

“refuge cove” where boats and people go to get out of the wind and wildness of the sea. David sees God like that (refuge for his soul). God is a refuge for His people. Psalm 46:1 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.”

David provides another image of God’s protecting work in the next phrase. “In the shadow of your wings, I take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.” As a little chick finds refuge under the mother’s wings, David finds refuge under the Lord’s wings.

I’m not a bird watcher. But apparently with some birds, the chicks crawl under the mother’s wings or under her side for protection when a storm comes or danger threatens. Now there is one particular bird that many of you might be thinking about this weekend: the

turkey. (Show Turkey Picture)



Did you know? During the first few weeks of life, wild young turkeys sleep on the ground under their mother’s wings? After a month or so, they leave the ground and fly at night to a large low branch. They “place themselves under the deeply curved wings of their kind and careful parent.” This picture shows a turkey parent with their turkey babies (chicks, turklets, turkey pups) under their wings. Here’s

¹ Adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 200).

another picture of a mother duck with a little guy under his Mom's wings.



This photo was taken after they had gone for a swim in the pond. This little guy just couldn't get in under mother's wings. The caption reads "Believe it or not, there are 17 newly hatched ducklings under this female mallards wings. Poor baby!" Under God's wings there's room for all His kids. Isn't that a beautiful picture of comfort? The kids can dive under the parent. She deals with the storm or the threat. She provides the warmth. It's like that with God. David dives under God's wings for protection until this storm passes.

Characteristic of God #3: David portrays God like a watchful parent in a busy playground. (3)

Verse 3. "He sends from heaven and saves me. God sends his love and faithfulness. David sees God's active involvement in His life. God is not like a powerful king with no interest in His subjects. Nor is He like a distracted ruler uninformed about the real plight of His people. God actively engages in David's life by sending from heaven. So in the first half of verse 3 David says simply "He sends from heaven and the result is some sort of salvation. But at the end of verse 3 David tells us what is sent; God's love and faithfulness.

Faithfulness is following through on what one says they'll do. A faithful person takes the faith others have placed on them and comes through giving more confidence to that faith. God sends this steadfast love and faithfulness for help in his time of need.

God is kind of like a watchful parent in a busy playground. One of the places we got to visit on our vacation this summer was the Parksville Central Park and Beach on Vancouver Island. They have a massive playground there. It was kind of a cool day so not many people were sitting by the beach. Everyone congregated at the playground. There were kids everywhere. You parents with kids know what its like to keep track of kids in a place like that.

Amidst the seething mass of kids, you identify your kids and keep watch on them. Your child plays maybe totally unaware of your watchful eye. But then they totter on the edge of a high play structure. Or they need help getting the rope for the zip line. Or they tumble and get a scrape. Suddenly you appear with a steadying hand or reach up or a comforting hug. How was that possible in the midst of all those

kids? The parent keeps a watchful eye on their own kids and sends help as soon as it is needed.

The same is true with God and His children. God knows each of us by name. He knows what's going on in our lives. He sends from heaven what we need. In the middle of verse 3, David describes the practical impact of God's sending. "He rebukes those who hotly pursue me." In some way, God engages David's enemies. When anyone takes issue with God's kids, they'll have God to deal with. David trusts God to somehow deal with those who pursue him.

Then in verse 4, we have a graphic verse with a challenge to interpret. David is surrounded by some beasts. In fact, some versions describe them as fiery beasts. It is a picture of ferocity and threat.

But is David despairing or declaring? Is he saying (Mournfully) "I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts – men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords." Or (Confidently) – "I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts – men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords."

Verse 4 could be a lament over David's difficulties. It could reveal what David feels even when he lies down. He's surrounded in his mind by all these beasts these people that speak destructive words. It's people with sharp tongues that surround him. "Their teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords." Words have this power to pierce, cut and slash. David may be remembering all the accusations hurled at him by Saul and his men.

But this could also be a statement of confidence. David has just said in verse 3 that God will rebuke his enemies. Then in verse 5, he breaks into praise. Verse 5 seems pretty out of place if the fourth verse is a lament. But if verse 4 is a declaration of confidence, then the bursting praise of verse 5 makes sense.

Look at what David describes himself doing in verse 4. The English Standard Version renders the first phrase this way – "My soul is in the midst of lions, I lie down amidst fiery beasts." Now I don't know about you, but if I was surrounded by fiery beasts, I wouldn't be lying down. I'd be running or looking for a fire hose to drive back those beasts. But David lies down – an Old Testament image for a sense of peace. It could be that He can lie down in peace even with all

the sharp words of others swirling around him. He's confident that the Lord will deal with His enemies.

In fact as the Psalm continues in verse 6, David describes how a trap intended to harm him turned out harming those who set it. "They spread a net for my feet – I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path – but they have fallen into it themselves." Somehow things backfired on David's enemies. Could it be the hidden hand of God that turned this around? See that little word *Selah* after verse 6. Scholars think it might point to an intentional pause in the song so that the worshipper can ponder what was just said. "Consider this people; God turns around the harm intended for His people onto those who set it." This is the God at work on your behalf.

In verses 7-9, David breaks into steadfast praise which we will get to in a minute. But I would like to point out one more characteristic of God in verse 10. **Characteristic of God #4 - David describes the magnitude of God's great love and faithfulness. (10)** David celebrates the massive love and faithfulness of God. "Great is your love, reaching the heavens and your faithfulness reaches the skies." In verse 3, God *sends* his love and faithfulness. In verse 10, God's love

and faithfulness are reaching *back up* into the sky and clouds. It's like David has moved from being surrounded by these fiery beasts who tear at him with their words to sensing the surrounding love and faithfulness of the Lord.

We went to West Edmonton Mall waterpark this past summer for our oldest daughter's birthday. One section they have in there is this huge splash park. Above the splash park is this massive bucket. It slowly fills up with water. Then when it reaches a certain point it tips over and drenches the park with its contents. But then the same water is carried back up through pipes and pumps to fill up the bucket again for another drenching.

Perhaps God's love and faithfulness are like that. God drenches us with His love and faithfulness. It comes down over us. We get a glimpse of the magnitude of God's love and the immensity of His faithfulness in our lives – maybe when we come to the cross or one of our kids gets baptized. Then we talk to other Christians and hear their stories. We realize He has drenched them with love and faithfulness too. Then we look around at the world amidst all the messes and muck that humans make. We see the mountains, the sky, the stars and

galaxies beyond and know that God is in control. It is like we see His love and faithfulness going beyond us back up into sky. Scholars of the Psalms point out that when a Psalmist mentions something at the beginning and end of the Psalm, he's framing the entire Psalm with this. He's emphasizing God's love and faithfulness at the beginning, end and by implication all through.

Despite his difficulties, David focuses on the character of God this greatly impacts him; mercy, protection, watchful parent and surrounding steadfast love. From this faith in the great God, David then offers a steadfast response to God's love and faithfulness.

A steadfast response to God's love and faithfulness. (7-9)

Verse 7 "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast! I will sing and make melody! Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations." David's circumstances haven't changed. But His focus has sharpened on the God who can bring change. David is so steadfastly committed to God, that he imagines waking up the dawn with his own praise. He

demonstrates a steadfast commitment to the Lord because of God's character.

Might we offer a similar commitment today? Might we declare a steadfast heart for the Lord, not because we're on a high; not because things are going super well in our lives right now but solely based on who God is and what He has done? The amazing thing about God is that He does not leave us alone to follow through on our commitments. In fact, it is only by His continued grace that we can remain steadfast to Him.

God invites some here today to respond to Him for the very first time by trusting Christ as Savior and Lord. Psalm 57 is in a way, a picture of what God has done for you in Christ. Christ is the ultimate demonstration of God's mercy. Through Christ, we appeal to God for mercy. In Christ, we find refuge under God's wings. Through Christ, God fulfills His purposes for us. God sent Jesus from heaven to save people; to save you from the consequences of your sin. God demonstrated His love and faithfulness by following through on His promise to send His Son. That Son paid for your sin with His blood. He calls you today to put all your trust on Christ. Through that faith

God comes in. He saves you from His wrath; He adopts you as His child. He declares you not guilty forever. Will you respond to God in prayer now?

God invites some here today to steadfastly commit to Him.

Some of us have been asking the wrong question in our Christian lives. We're most concerned about "what is permissible" rather than "what's most important." The Bible puts it this way in Romans 12:1 –
Therefore, I urge you brothers (and sisters) in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship." Will you respond to the Lord by declaring "my heart is steadfast for you Lord?"

God invites some of us here to act on His call to pray; to commit to pray. I know, there's that dirty word again. One author nails why we might chafe at this point.

"We fear that commitments will make prayer seem like compulsory exercises rather than free-will offerings. We fear we will not be able to fulfill our covenant. We feel condemned in our hearts over past broken covenants. Remember that God knows the intention of your heart. He knows your weaknesses and frailties. God is pleased with

your attempts to please him. The promises and commitments of your heart are not made in vain. God is working at the desire level of your formation. He has a way of bringing to pass all the longings deep within – after all, he placed those longings there."

You might even be saying now "I'll pray when I have more time." You will never "have" time to pray. We must "make" time to pray. Everything will try to pull us away from this sacred time. Our phones will ring. Our pens will run dry. Someone will knock. We might suddenly have an urgent need to do something we've left undone for years. In those split seconds, we must decide whether we will hold steady in the inner sanctuary of our hearts or rush out of the holy place, tyrannized by the urgent." Chambers – "the tiniest fragment of obedience and heaven opens."

So we hesitate. Yet by God's strength, we can step out. God supplies strength for what He commands. Maybe you will want to pray the honest prayer found on the last page of your message insert.

Blessed Savior, I pace back and forth at the altar of commitment. I really do want a fixed habit of prayer. At least, that is what I want

right now. I'm not sure if that is what I will want two weeks from now. I do know that without some kind of consistent communion with you, I will not know holy obedience. So, as best I can, I promise to set aside time regularly for prayer, reflection and Bible reading.

Strengthen me in this covenant. Help me to so delight in your presence that I will want to come home to you often. In your name and for your sake I make this covenant. – Amen.²

Our greatest need is God whether we know it or not. It is easier to be “committed to” and “steadfast” towards God when we're on a spiritual high or when life is filled with blessings. But when life is just ordinary or we're going through some great trial, it can be difficult to remain steadfast towards the Lord. So we must recall God's love and faithfulness demonstrated throughout history and in our lives. Then with our faith firmly fixed on the God whose “love reaches the heavens and faithfulness to the clouds” we remain steadfast in our commitment to Him and praise of Him. And we don't do this on our own. “We cannot do a single good act unless God first gives us the desire for it and then empowers us to do it. But that is just

the point, God gives us the desire. We respond in the only way we can to the invading, urging, inviting, persuading call of Eternal love.

² Richard Foster, *Prayer*.