

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

CONVICTION

(Jeremiah 35)

Study #5

Sermon series: Faithful

(Stories from Jeremiah)

Introduction: Because he/she said so...

2008 was a year of discovery for me.

In that year, I admitted that the flailing-around exercising I was doing at home wasn't being all that effective at helping me get more fit. In 2008 I also discovered something called "Crossfit", an exercise program that promised to guide people like me to improved fitness. And, in that year, I also discovered what a "sheep" I am.

Within days of following the suggestion of my son, Ben, that I check out crossfit.com, I was hooked.

I'm not going to take much time during a sermon to talk about Crossfit.

There are plenty of "Crossfit-haters" - you might be one of them - and I don't want to bait you. But, in 2008, Crossfit met a need I had for exercise direction and it served me well for several years.

One of the services Crossfit offers on its website is a "Workout of the Day" feature. Through the Workout of the Day, I became a sheep to Crossfit, my exercise shepherd.

No longer did I have to decide which exercises I would do on any given day. Crossfit told me if I would be running, jumping rope, doing pull-ups, training with weights, or something else.

All I had to do was check the website.

Now, I no longer do the Workout of the Day and I'm no longer an active Crossfitter. But for years, I would check the website in the evening to see what workout I would be doing the next day.

Whatever uncertainty the next day might bring, at least I knew what exercises I would be doing. Why? *"Because they said so."*

There are times when, *"Because I said so"* works just fine.

- Military life depends on soldiers following a commander's commands. *"Because I said so"* is good enough.
- Teachers have been known to employ *"Because I said so"* on occasion, and to good effect.
- Parents should try to not use, *"Because I said so"* very often, but it'll do in a pinch.

Then, there are other situations (like my Crossfit workouts) where we voluntarily agree to do something just because somebody told us to.¹

You can probably think of times when you have done something simply *"because he/she told you to."*

Today, we are going to meet a group of people who adopted a set of behaviors as *life convictions* just because a certain someone told them to. Their commitment to hold to their convictions speaks volumes to us, today, who belong to Jesus.

The episode we are exploring this morning involves an incident that occurred a few years before the Babylonian armies began their siege of Jerusalem.

¹ Kathy, not at all the sheep that I am, often looked at the Crossfit workout of the day and remarked, *"I'm not about to do that!"*

An Offer to the Rechabites (vv. 1-5)

The Word of the Lord (vv. 1-2)

Jewish life in the days of Jehoiakim

Before we look at today's story, though, let me just say that if you are ever confused by the listing and order and names of the many kings of Israel and Judah mentioned in the Old Testament, I get it.

Keeping track of the Jewish kings is hard, and confusion reigns among those who try to keep them straight. It is especially challenging as we near the end of Judah's national existence, exactly where we find ourselves in the book of Jeremiah.²

The rule of King Jehoiakim...

Today, however, won't be all that confusing because today we're focusing on one event that occurred during the time of Jehoiakim, a very wicked son of Josiah, who was a very good king.³

Jehoiakim became king in Jerusalem at the age of 25. While king, he made the mistake of rebelling against Babylon. In response, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, sent raiding parties into Israel to make life miserable for God's people.⁴

The Jews eventually lost heart and stopped fighting, basically giving in to Babylon.

² There are reasons for the difficulty. (1). Two different sons of King Josiah served as Jewish kings; (2). One of them, Jehoiakim, was appointed to reign as king in Judah by the Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco. The other, Jehoahaz, was taken to Egypt; (3). Jehoiakim (whose name was originally Eliakim and was named "Jehoiakim" by Pharaoh Neco) was taken to live out his days in Babylon; (4). King Zedekiah also was taken to Babylon to die; AND (5). Jehoiakim's son was named (unhelpfully) Jehoiachin.

³ Jeremiah and Josiah began their ministries (one a prophet and the other a king) at nearly the same time. They knew each other well. It surely must have grieved Jeremiah to see the ungodliness of the son of his good friend, Josiah.

⁴ These raids are likely the attacks mentioned by Daniel (1:1-3), which took place in 605 BC, and which led to the exile of the leading citizens of Jerusalem, including Daniel.

And, at the end of the raids, Nebuchadnezzar had King Jehoiakim bound with bronze chains and taken to Babylon, which was no great loss to Israel. Here's the Bible's summary of Jehoiakim's life:

[2 Kings 23:37]...he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done.

Life with God under Jehoiakim

But make no mistake. Even though he was gone, Jehoiakim had left miserable wreckage in his wake. The people in Jerusalem were stuck in the idolatry, immorality, violence, and injustice into which he had led them.⁵

When we enter today's story, the Jews were an ungodly mess, still engrossed in gross wickedness. And it was at this point that Jeremiah received a message from God.

God was making another overture to get His people's attention, and He will use a remarkable clan of people to do it. He's going to use the Rechabites.

Getting to know the Rechabites

[1] The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, [2] "Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink."

Their origins

We learn about the Rechabites way back in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 10.

⁵ In 2 Chronicles 36:8 there is a reference to his "*outrageous sacrilege*" (The Message). This detestable act is not specifically spelled out, though, and for that reason is all the more ominous.

There, a man named Jonadab, who was of the family of Rechab, helped a guy named Jehu destroy the wicked family of the wicked king, Ahab. (842 BC)⁶ Whew!

When we come to the time of Jeremiah, two centuries have passed and Jonadab's descendants (the Rechabites) are living in Israel. They stuck out from the rest of those living in Israel like sore thumbs.

Their characteristics

For one thing, they weren't blood relatives of the Jews. They had identified with the Jews and they believed what the Jews believed. But they were not descendants of Abraham.⁷

In addition, the Rechabites were nomads. They didn't live in cities. The whole clan traveled from place to place living in tents.⁸

The Rechabites were non-Jewish nomads, living within the land of Israel. They were accepted as allies and *almost* as family. But the Rechabites danced to their own tune. They were their own dogs.

It is important that we know these distinctives of the Rechabites. Otherwise, we'll never get the "point" of Jeremiah 35.

Their life in Jerusalem

As of Jeremiah 35, the Rechabites were living in Jerusalem. We listen to them tell why:

[Jeremiah 35:11] "But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, 'Come and let us go to Jerusalem before the army of the Chaldeans and before the army of the Arameans.' So, we have dwelt in Jerusalem."

⁶ Read the story carefully and you'll get the idea that Jonadab - like Jehu - was both zealous for God AND ruthless. The slaughter of the Baal-worshippers under Jehu was criticized sharply by the prophet Hosea (chapter 1) for its extreme violence.

⁷ They descend from the Kenites, a clan first mentioned in Genesis 15. They were a distinct people group that had migrated into Palestine from Asia.

⁸ Some think that they were the ancient world's equivalent of the Middle Ages' traveling blacksmiths. So, the International Standard Encyclopedia of the Bible.

They're still living in tents, but now in Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah has received a word from God to meet with the Rechabites.

Here are the details of the meeting.

The "Set-up" (vv. 3-4)

[3] Then I took Jaazaniah the son of Jeremiah, son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons and the whole house of the Rechabites,⁹ [4] and I brought them into the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, which was above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, the doorkeeper.

Notice that the meeting with the Rechabites was to take place indoors. These are not indoors people. They are living-in-a-tent people.

They worked with metal and would travel to your farm to repair your farm implements. Jeremiah invited them to a meeting in a building with a roof and walls.

And not to just any old building. They were called to a meeting in the temple compound, the most holy place in Israel.

There could not have been a more imposing and disorienting location for this gathering than the place Jeremiah chose.

In my humble opinion, everything about this meeting was orchestrated to put the Rechabites at least a little bit "off balance."

Think about it...

- Outside people are called inside.
- True worshipers are called into the holy temple of God.
- Laborers are invited to plush accommodations.

It is like inviting a newly minted buck private to the General's office; asking a new hire to a meeting in the CEO's office at USAA; inviting a US citizen with no experience in high places to Capitol Hill.

⁹ Jeremiah makes it clear that the whole Rechabite community in the city at the time was taken to the temple chamber for this meeting. (35:3)

Everyone is in place. The Rechabites are, I suspect, a little bit unnerved. And Jeremiah puts his living object lesson in motion.

The Invitation (v. 5)

[5] Then I set before the men of the house of the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups; and I said to them, "Drink wine!"

This was not just a simple question, "Will you drink wine?" It wasn't even a polite invitation. There was no "Please, help yourself."

It was a summons.

Jeremiah was a well-known prophet of God who could be VERY persuasive, and he's giving an order. There are pitchers of wine on the table. Empty cups are ready to be filled.

Everything was arranged to free up the Rechabites to drink wine. It's an honoring environment for the Rechabites and, at the same time, a very elaborate set-up.

What we expect is a happy scene of drinks all around. That is not what we get.

An Offer the Rechabites HAD TO Refuse (vv. 6-11)

Commanded by Their Forefather (vv. 6-7)

[6] But they said, "We will not drink wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall not drink wine, you or your sons, forever.'

Their response was immediate and firm. No stuttering. No hesitation. "No."¹⁰

And why wouldn't they drink? Because two hundred years earlier, their ancestor, Jonadab, commanded that they not drink alcohol. There is no debate. Just "No."

This ancestor, Jonadab, gave the Rechabites other commands that they had also obeyed to the last detail.

[7] 'You shall not build a house, and you shall not sow seed and you shall not plant a vineyard or own one; but in tents you shall dwell all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.'

We wonder what motivated Jonadab's commands. We're not told. We just don't know.¹¹

What we do know is that from the time that Jonadab gave these commands to the time of Jeremiah, the Rechabites had obeyed them all.

Guided by Conviction (vv. 8-11)

Their commitment to obey ancestors

[8a] "We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us..."

They did what their great-great-great (great?) grandfather told them to do.

[8b] "...not to drink wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons or our daughters, [9] nor to build ourselves houses to dwell in; and we do not have vineyard or field or seed. [10] "We have only dwelt in tents, and have obeyed and have done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us."

Now, here's what we must not miss about the Rechabites.

There were no commands from God in the Old Testament that anyone should live with these restrictions. And, as far as we know, nobody else lived the way they lived.¹²

¹¹ Remember, when Israel settled in Canaan and began to live a sedentary life and to practice agriculture, they encountered the Canaanite culture and religion. More and more they were drawn to the fertility-god Baal, to whom the Canaanites turned to bless their crops and flocks and were tempted to accept the religion of Canaan.

¹⁰ The Hebrew negative is very strong here (*lo* instead of 'al before the verb).

It seems that Jonadab simply required that his descendants submit to rules that he believed would be good for them.

And they - like any good “sheep”, Crossfit or otherwise - obeyed, *“Because he said so.”*

It’s like the Amish in parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio resist electricity and the internal combustion engine and shirts with buttons. The Rechabites didn’t drink, garden, or live in stick-built homes.

There was and is nothing especially holy about the lifestyles of the Rechabites or the Amish. But their distinctives did and do effectively separate them from the rest of a culture.¹³

Their lifestyle choices were fine. And, as long as they didn’t impose them on others, there was no problem. But the lifestyle choices of both Amish and Rechabites were completely of human origin.

God never said about any of these distinctives, *“Thou shalt...”* or *“Thou shalt not...”*

Jeremiah has orchestrated this whole scene of offering wine to the Rechabites - and he knew full well that they would refuse! - to give him just the picture he needed to get across a very important point to his fellow Jews living in Jerusalem.

Learning from the Rechabites (vv. 12-19)

The Rechabites and Israel, 600 BC (vv. 12-19)

Contrasting responses (vv. 12-16)

[12] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, [13] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, “Will you not receive instruction by listening to My words?” declares the Lord.

¹² Not even the Nazirites, a term that described people who were keeping a vow to God and lived with certain restrictions for a defined period of time.

¹³ Note also the modern Hasidic Jews (who wear clothes dating to the Polish ghettos of World War II).

[14] “The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons not to drink wine, are observed. So, they do not drink wine to this day, for they have obeyed their father’s command. But I have spoken to you again and again; yet YOU HAVE NOT LISTENED TO ME. [15] “Also I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them again and again, saying: ‘Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to worship them. Then you will dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your forefathers’; but YOU HAVE NOT INCLINED YOUR EAR OR LISTENED TO ME. [16] ‘Indeed, the sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have observed the command of their father which he commanded them, but THIS PEOPLE HAS NOT LISTENED TO ME.’”

Did you hear it?

Three times, the Lord pointed out that the Rechabites paid attention to their ancestor, Jonadab’s, words. And three times (v. 14, v. 15, 16) He pointed out the Jews’ inattention to His words.

Here were the Rechabites who obeyed an ancestor just *“Because he said so”* while the Jews didn’t pay attention to, listen to, or obey what Almighty GOOD told them to do.

Jeremiah’s dramatic lesson wasn’t lost on the Jews of the 6th Century BC, who stood condemned by the Rechabite community. And the lesson isn’t lost on us, either, who follow Jesus in 2020.

We’ll come back to what all of this says to us right after we see how the story ends. First, though, see how it ended for the Jews who learned - but not really - the lesson of the Rechabites.

Contrasting futures (v. 17)

For Judah (v. 17)

[17] “Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am bringing on Judah and on all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the disaster that I have pronounced against them; because I spoke to them but they did not listen, and I have called them but they did not answer.’ ”

I believe that there was, at this moment, a slight window of hope that judgment might not come.

The object lesson provided by the *convictions* of the Rechabites was more than an object lesson. It was a call to the Jews to obedience and to repentance.

When the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, God relented and did not destroy the Assyrians. If the Jews of Jeremiah's day had repented, perhaps God might have relented so that the Babylonian destruction might have at least been delayed.

But the words of Jeremiah here are clear warnings of exactly what will happen if the people continued in their rebellious ways: Judgment was coming.¹⁴

But for the Rechabites, the future was bright with the prospects of blessing.

For the Rechabites (vv. 18-19)

[18] Then Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, kept all his commands and done according to all that he commanded you; [19] therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me always." ' "¹⁵

God's promise of blessing was not because the Rechabites didn't drink or plant vineyards. His commendation had nothing to do with their nomadic lifestyles, their refusal to build houses, or their insistence on camping out all the time.

No. The particulars of their odd lives weren't the thing.

What won God's approval was that they were people of *conviction* who didn't waver in their behavior even when tested.

Well, the Jews didn't repent. So, as Jeremiah had warned, destruction came to Jerusalem.

But blessing did come to the Rechabites for living lives of conviction. Evidently, they left the city before the final onslaught of the Babylonians, survived, and even became involved in the service of the temple during the post-exilic period.^{16, 17}

God does indeed know how to reward His faithful people.

And now, having watched the living parable Jeremiah applied to his contemporaries, we fast forward to 2020 to consider what the Rechabites have to say to us.

You and Me, AD 2020

Conviction vs. convenience

For the years that I was a regular, wannabe Crossfitter, I voluntarily did the exercises the website told me to do.

I was *convinced* that following the prescribed "Workout of the Day" would improve my overall health and fitness, so becoming a compliant Crossfit sheep was a matter of *conviction*.

But I will confess that it was often a squishy conviction. If I was exceptionally tired or sore or busy, it wasn't unheard of for me to pass on the Workout of the Day.

Convenience sometimes won out over conviction.

My Crossfit "conviction" can be likened to drivers with respect to the speed limit. We follow the speed limit...mostly.

¹⁴ See Deuteronomy 27-28 for a list of the horrible punishments that would come to the Jews if they were disobedient.

¹⁵ And there is, after all, a Commandment to the effect that children should honor their father and mother.

¹⁶ The Mishnah reports that the "children of Jonadab son of Rechab" had a fixed day in the year for bringing wood for the altar of the temple, a very high honor.

¹⁷ There is also the record of a man named Malchijah (a Rechabite) who helped repair the Dung Gate in the days of Nehemiah (3:14).

When the speed limit seems about right for the situation, we keep it. When we see flashing lights in a School Zone - especially when we see a police car - we stay right at 20mph. When we're passing through Leon Valley, well, always.

But if 1604 is wide open, no traffic and clear sailing, 70 seems a little slow and we may increase speed.

Likewise, many of us have very strong convictions about eating healthy, unless (again, confession time) we're talking about ice cream - especially the \$.49 cones at QT gas stations...

We have convictions about only watching certain kinds of media...unless we're alone or unless we're lonely.

Our convictions about lots of things can be as squishy as my Crossfit convictions. Negotiable *if* something gets in the way, *if* there is a more appealing option, *if* following our conviction costs us, *if* it is inconvenient, *if* someone we respect suggests another way.

So, back to Jeremiah.

The Rechabites' convictions weren't negotiable but were DNA-level deep. They followed the directives of their ancestor, Jonadab, even when it was inconvenient, even when they were invited to violate them by God's prophet.

We're not putting the Rechabites on a pedestal for their lifestyle choices. Jeremiah's point to the Jews wasn't, "*Stop living in houses! No more drinking wine!!*"¹⁸

No - the point was that they stayed true to their convictions, based on their respect for the one who gave the command.

Jeremiah says to you and me today, "*Imitate THAT.*"

Here's one way we might imitate the Rechabites.

Conviction in a world of grey

During this season of COVID-19, Christians have come to differing convictions before God about how they will conduct themselves.

There are some clear lines that involve laws and statutes that we are all to obey. But there is significant "grey", too.

Some, after prayer and reflection, have chosen stricter restrictions for themselves than others have. OK.

Paul's words about personal convictions come into play here.

When he was advising the Christians in Rome about whether or not to observe certain holy days, or whether or not to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, he made clear that not every Christian was going to have the same conviction. They wouldn't all see it the same way.

Some will and some won't observe special days. Some will and some won't eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

He wrote, [**Romans 14:22**] *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.*

A "**conviction before God**" is what you keep on doing even when the most respected person in your world tells you to stop.

When it comes to grey areas - and life is filled with grey areas - hold to your convictions and respect the convictions of others.¹⁹

And when the One who gives you a command, who issues an assignment, is the Lord Jesus Christ - your Savior - hold that command as a no-matter-what *conviction* - and do it.

What is, then, Jesus' overarching, covers-all-the-bases, if-you-don't-do-anything-else-do-this command?

¹⁸ As an aside, the leaders of the temperance movement in 19th century England adopted the name "Rechabites".

¹⁹ Certainly, the Rechabites weren't trying to get the Jews to follow them into tent life; nor were the Jews urging the Rechabites to plant vineyards.

Love.

Conviction to love in a world in desperate need of love

God showed how much He loved the world and everyone in it by giving His Son, so that whoever believes in Him won't perish, but will have eternal life.

This Son - Jesus! - showed the way of love by giving Himself on a cross to, as John the Baptist said, ***"take away the sin of the world."***

The way of Jesus is the way of love.

We who follow Jesus are to love each other the way He has loved us: sacrificially. When those who don't know Jesus see us loving each other sacrificially, they'll sit up and take notice. They'll see Jesus through our love.

And we are to love people who are in need the way the Good Samaritan loved the man who had been beaten, robbed, and left to die in a ditch: with over-the-top, unexpected extravagance. When outsiders start to identify Christians as *"the people who care, love, and serve"*, they'll be drawn to the Jesus who loves them best.

To borrow from Jeremiah, this command to love isn't coming from Jonadab and we're not Rechabites.

This command to love comes direct from the One who loves us best.

So...

Invite friends to join you at Saturday's Harvest Festival where they will be loved by those who are serving at the event. Or consider being a servant at the Festival, yourself.

Keep your eyes peeled for ways to be a Good Samaritan by serving the least and the lost and the last with your time and money.

Help bear the burden of a friend who is suffering.

Point a friend who doesn't know your Jesus to Him. Help your friend move forward on the life-giving path of following Jesus.²⁰

Speak the truth, and always lovingly, no matter the cost.

Love, even the one who is hard to love, like Jesus did.

Love, even if it costs embarrassment and ridicule.

Love, even as it drains you of energy.

Love, even if it results in rejection.

Love, even if at some future point, it leads to overt persecution.

Love, no matter what.

²⁰ I came across this story on the Voice of the Martyr's website this week: A woman named Inzali has led many Buddhists to Jesus Christ in Myanmar. And her bold witness on the front lines has caught the attention of Buddhist leaders, who often report her evangelistic activities to local authorities. While concerned that her work will one day lead to her arrest, she remains joyful. She knows that her arrest would simply be a sign that her work has been effective. "The more we share the gospel and preach the Word all over the world, the more trouble we'll have," she told a VOM worker.