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Called to Speak for the Lord – the Book of Jeremiah

The Hardness of the Heart

February 28, 2021

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 17

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 18

If you listened to last week's Sunday School lesson, you will recall that we spent that time thinking about this verse:

1 Kings 19:18 ESV Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

We went to Romans 11 where the Apostle Paul cited this very scripture:

Romans 11:4-5 ESV But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (5) So too at

the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

The church, the true church, the true Israel – God's genuine sheep – is *the remnant*. It is a *portion* out of the whole. Just as God preserved and, you could say, even *created*, people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David *out of the large body called Israel*, so He has always done so. Paul says... *so too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace*.

And we noted that it is absolutely vital for us to be well versed in this truth or we are going to find ourselves in trouble. We will be discouraged, just like Elijah was, thinking we alone are left, that the church is on its way out, that Christians are phony and the gospel doesn't really change anyone at all.

Now, the fundamental reason that the remnant is God's creation, that it is God who preserves His true people, the reason that these things are necessary if anyone is ever going to be saved and if God's promises are going to be fulfilled, is:

Man, in his sin, is dead to God. He is no more capable of believing in Christ and repenting of his sin or of loving God than a corpse is. He is deaf and blind to the Word and Light of Christ. And he does this freely and willingly because his heart is wicked. That is to say, man in his sin, in his flesh as he is born into this world, freely chooses to do what he wants. And what he always wants is, sin. It is what he chooses. This is what we call the doctrine of Total Depravity. Total. There is no “island of goodness” in man after the fall. No ability to choose Christ because you cannot choose what you do not desire.

Thus, the Bible teaches the doctrine of the remnant. A people chosen by God, granted mercy in Christ, regenerated in heart, given the gift of faith and repentance.

John 6:35-37 ESV Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (36) But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. (37) All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

John 6:63-67 ESV It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. (64) But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) (65) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” (66) After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. (67) So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”

What has all of this to do with Jeremiah? Well, follow along as I read and I think you will see it (you have seen it in chapter 18 which we already read) –

Jeremiah 17:1-13 ESV **“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, (2) while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree and on the high hills, (3) on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the**

price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory.

(4) You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.”

(5) Thus says the LORD: **“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.** (6) He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

(7) “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. (8) He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

(9) **The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?** (10) “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his

deeds.” (11) Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch, so is he who gets riches but not by justice; in the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool.

(12) A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. (13) O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

There it is: “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars,”.

Later in chapter 31 the Lord will announce the radical regeneration of this hard heart engraved with sin:

Jeremiah 31:33 ESV For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

That new covenant, of course, is the one established by Christ.

You have seen this same terminology in the New Testament:

Romans 2:13-16 ESV For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. (14) For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. (15) They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (16) on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:5-8 ESV For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. (6) For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (7) For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (8) Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But Jeremiah's countrymen were characterized by a sin *nature* that defined who they were and which directed every thought and action they made.

Trusting in man and making flesh his strength, as Jeremiah puts it, is the very same thing that Paul is talking about here in Romans 8. That is why Israel habitually disobeyed God, turned away from Him, hated His Law, and embraced idols and the nations around them. Their sin was engraved on their hearts. They were "of the flesh" and all of their thinking was defined by it.

As a result, they *trusted in man. In the flesh.*

Look again at Jeremiah's description:

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

As you look at the ominous situation of Judah, the warnings of which Jeremiah continually announced, you see this issue playing itself out. *Who can understand it?* Who can comprehend how anyone could ignore all of the Lord's warnings, turn a blind eye to the thunderclouds of judgment right before their eyes, have a full knowledge of what had happened to the northern kingdom in 722BC because of their sin? Who can understand it?

The fallen human nature, the heart, the essence of the mind and will of the sinner, is the most deceitful, lying personality you will ever come across.

Who in a sound mind can look around today at our condition in this world, in this present life, and not recognize that something is terribly wrong. And not just wrong with the world, but wrong with myself! Here is a creation in rebellion against the Creator, and yet in spite of all the warnings God has given him, man persists in refusing Christ.

You see this in the last part of this chapter as well. The Lord sent Jeremiah once again to warn the people. They were regularly and defiantly disobeying God's Law, in this case the 4th commandment to remember the

sabbath day and keep it holy. But instead, they were carrying on their commerce just like any other day of the week. They despised the Lord and ignored His Law. And when Jeremiah warned them that God's hand of judgment was about to fall on them if they did not repent, how did they respond?

Jeremiah 17:23 ESV Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction.

This is the outworking of that deceitful, wicked heart you see. And so it is today. Warning after warning has been given. We have God's Word written right here in our hands. We have the gift of Christ come into this world to save all who will come to Him in faith. But who is listening? Who is repenting? Instead what we see more and more is man's trust in himself, trust in man, trust in flesh, and a hardened despising of the Lord.

And just like Judah, we see clear signs all around us, increasingly, that the Lord is not going to let this rebellion continue indefinitely. Christ is going to come. All human beings will stand

before Him in judgment. And no one will be able to hide the real condition of their heart:

(10) “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”

You see in the rest of the chapter this continuance of the willful choices freely made by the hard, unbelieving heart of the wicked:

Jeremiah 17:14-27 ESV Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise. (15) **Behold, they say to me, “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!”**

(16) I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips; it was before your face. (17) Be not a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster.

(18) Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but let me not be put to shame; let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed; bring upon them the day of disaster; destroy them with

double destruction!

(19) Thus said the LORD to me: “Go and stand in the People's Gate, by which the kings of Judah enter and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, (20) and say: ‘Hear the word of the LORD, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates. (21) Thus says the LORD: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. (22) And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers. (23) **Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction.**

(24) “‘But if you listen to me, declares the LORD, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it, (25) then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And this city shall be inhabited forever.

(26) And people shall come from the cities of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the LORD. (27) But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.”

You see the evil in their hearts by their response to Jeremiah, *who they knew full well was a prophet speaking for God*:

(15) Behold, they say to me, “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!”

You can hear the mocking tone in this, can’t you? This is the very thing Peter warned us about:

2 Peter 3:3-4 ESV knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last

days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. (4) They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

Many people overtly boast of this today – you have heard it. “I’ll see you in hell!” Or “You’re a fool for talking all that hellfire and brimstone idiocy,” or more commonly, they are what we might call “passive aggressive.” That is, they don’t come right out and say it, but their entire life is characterized by what is obvious – *they don’t believe a word of it*. “That’s nice that you believe those things, but I choose to believe that God would never send people to hell.”

The people of Judah in Jeremiah’s day found out otherwise. The Word that they mocked turned out to be the power of God and it effected every single thing they had been warned about.

A Two-Edged Sword

An illustration of the deceitfulness of the sinner’s heart, engraved with his sin, is seen in the two-edged nature of the gospel. This message of good news for all who believe in Christ, is also a

message of judgment for all who reject God's Son. Let me explain.

Have you noticed the often repeated phrase:

Revelation 2:7 ESV **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says** to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

It is repeated in each of the 7 letters to the churches in Revelation, but it also appears throughout the Bible:

Isaiah 6:9-10 ESV And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'" (10) Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

And Jesus explained it:

Matthew 13:12-16 ESV For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will

be taken away. (13) This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (14) Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "“You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” (15) For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' (16) But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

Unless the Lord gives us eyes to see and ears to hear, unless He chooses us by His mercy and regenerates our hearts, so that we are able to *freely choose Christ*, then we would never hear the gospel and believe it. This is why Jesus effected all the healing miracles of deaf and blind and dead people – to show us our condition in sin and how He is the only remedy.

For those who despise Christ, who put their trust in man and live as earth-dwellers, this same message of good news becomes an instrument of condemnation *which remains*

foolishness to them and even increases their blindness, deafness, and deadness of soul.

Now, if in light of this, anyone is thinking “well, God is not fair! What right has He to choose Jacob and hate Esau? How can He hold me responsible if salvation is all of Him? OR if anyone is thinking, “I am chosen by God. I can sin all I want and never end in hell.” *Then you need to read on...read chapter 18 once again...and you will see the fallacy of both of those lines of thought.*

Because God is the Potter, and we are His clay.