

Jeremiah 17

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 10

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

*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 will *never* understand your own heart,
so long as you rely on your own understanding.
So long as you insist on affirming your “right”
to be the final judge and arbiter of truth and reality,
you will only be exercising the sickness and deception of your heart –
you will only be refusing to acknowledge the only true God as God –
in other words, you will be an idolater!

If we would understand our deceitful hearts
then we must come to the LORD and allow his word to interpret us.

In Jeremiah 17, Jeremiah tells us that two kinds of trees:
the shrub of the desert and the tree planted by water.

What kind of tree are you?
Well, what kind of fruit do you bear?
The thorns of a desert shrub?
Or the fruit of the tree of life?

If you’re honest with yourself, then your fruit is rather mixed.
And that’s why we need our Psalm of response.
Because Psalm 1 is all about the blessed man –
the one who delights in the law of the LORD,
the one who meditates on it day and night.
Such a man is like a tree planted by streams of water.

He is the one who will stand in the judgment.

Psalms 1-2 open the Psalter by setting forth the ideal man in Psalm 1,
and then explaining who is the ideal man in Psalm 2.

We sang Psalm 2 last week –

Psalm 2 speaks of the Son of God – the son of David –
who sits on God’s throne and rules the nations.

He is the blessed man – the one who is a tree of life –
the one who will stand in the judgment.

And therefore, all who trust in him are blessed with him!

Sing Psalm 1
Read 1 Corinthians 10

I preached on Jeremiah 17 several years ago at a Reformation Day service –
but the passage fits really well with our catechism’s statement
of what sanctification is all about.

Q. 32. What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?

A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.

Q. 35. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

The doctrine of sanctification has two parts.

The first focuses on the *definitive* work of sanctification:

“whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God.”

The image of God was marred by the fall.

We were created to look like God – to resemble him.

But sin has corrupted us.

We no longer look like God.

The word “sanctification” means “to make holy.”

A couple weeks ago we talked about justification –
which focuses on our legal status before God.

In our justification God has *pardoned* our sin and removed our guilt,
by imputing *our sin* and guilt to Jesus (he was declared guilty in our place),
and imputing *his righteousness* to us.

Then last week we looked at the doctrine of adoption –

which focuses on how we have been made heirs together with Christ.

Sanctification focuses then on how God deals with our corruption.

How does God transform us so that we *become* holy –

because as Hebrews says, “without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”

And there are two parts to this:

first, we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God
(our definitive sanctification)

and second, we are more and more enabled to die unto sin and live unto righteousness
(our progressive sanctification).

Let's start with Jeremiah 17.

1. We Are Renewed in the Whole Man after the Image of God (Jeremiah 17)

a. "A Shrub in the Desert" – The Cursed Man Who Trusts in Man (17:5-6)

Jeremiah is speaking to the southern kingdom of Judah

just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah has been prophesying the coming of the exile.

Judah has sinned against God.

And because of their incessant rebellion against God,

they are about to be sent into exile.

And Jeremiah promises that when God delivers them from exile,

that will be a greater deliverance than the Exodus in the days of Moses.

As he says in Jeremiah 16:14-15,

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD,

when it shall no longer be said,

*'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel
out of the land of Egypt,'*

but

*'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel
out of the north country and out of all the countries
where he had driven them.'*

For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

In Jeremiah's day, the greatest event in all of history was the Exodus.

But Jeremiah promises that a day is coming that is even better than the Exodus!

Of course, the reason for this is because Judah has sinned against God.

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 (v1)

Their sin is indelibly etched upon their hearts!

It is really easy to apply this to ourselves!

We see how our sin is engraved upon our own hearts.

But this is not merely an individual problem.

Too often we see our own individual sin as the "real" problem –
and we don't think about the corporate nature of sin.

Jeremiah says that their sin is also etched on the *horns of their altars*,
while their children remember their altars and their Asherim
beside every green tree and on the high hills,
on the mountains in the open country

We often think that sin is an individual matter,
but Jeremiah reminds us that sin affects each other.
There is corporate sin, when a people turns away from the LORD to serve other gods.
And perhaps the most obvious form of this
is found in the tendency for children to imitate their parents.
Judah's children are imitating their fathers
in following other gods.
In the days of the good king, Josiah (as in the days of Hezekiah before him),
the high places were removed.
But the people of Judah remembered "the good old days" –
the days when they worshiped Yahweh on the high places.

And so God warns Judah that
your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil
as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory.
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. (17:3-4)

So within a span of ten verses you have two opposite statements:
I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.
(an echo of God's covenant promise to Abraham)
And *in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.*
Normally the word "forever" is used for God's covenant promises.
When God shows mercy—that is the normal context for his "forever" promises.
But here we are told that God's fire shall burn forever against his people.

Why does God say this?
This is the context for Jeremiah's two trees.
Both of the trees are covenantal trees.
The cursed shrub of the desert does not refer to the heathen nations.
The cursed shrub of the desert refers to a portion of God's covenant people:
As verse 13 says,
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.
We are not talking about people who have never heard the gospel.
We are talking about people who have "forsaken" the LORD –
those who Hebrews 6 tells us have "tasted" of the heavenly gift –
and yet, have forsaken the LORD – the fountain of living water.

Because there are two kinds of trees:
the cursed shrub of the desert who trusts in man,
and the blessed tree by the water who trusts in the LORD.

Let's look first at the cursed shrub.

Because far too often we act like a cursed shrub!
Far too often we trust in man, rather than trust the Lord.

Verse 8 speaks of the great threat to any plant:
heat.

When heat comes, what happens to you?

How do you respond to temptations and trials?

You are driving down the road and someone cuts you off—
how do you respond?

Your wife makes a comment that sends you into a rage—
why?

You find yourself exasperated by your children.

How do you respond to the “heat” of everyday life?

Our tendency is to respond like a shrub in the desert.

The desert shrub is generally a pretty prickly critter.

Desert shrubs have developed defense mechanisms—thorns and briars—
which are designed to keep animals away,
so that they don't get eaten.

The Hawaiian islands have taught us about how plants develop.

There are no native prickly plants in Hawaii.

The reason is simple:

There are also no small mammals that are native to Hawaii.

Since there are no predators to eat them,

the plants never developed defense mechanisms!

But we sure have!

When the heat of life beats down upon us,
our response is to develop defense mechanisms.

And these defense mechanisms have become ingrained,
so that we convince ourselves that they are natural, normal, and fine.

I used to tell my wife that needed to play that computer game
in order to relax and have some “down time” to “relieve stress.”

Sorry, guys—I hate to blow your cover—but that's just not true!

There is nothing wrong with games—

but too often we come up with excuses for being selfish!

And we all tend to respond to the “heat” of life by getting prickly—
by bringing forth thorns.

And it is easy to explain:

1) we blame it on our parents (I’m just like my dad)

The people of Jerusalem could have done this very easily!

We are just like our fathers!

But God says that this is the problem!

Their children remember their altars and their Asherim.

Blaming it on your parents won’t go very far with God!

2) or we blame someone else (the other guy made me do it)

Adam and Eve tried that one.

If only my wife would do X, then my life would be easier.

Blame-shifting is quite normal—and quite deadly,

because we never get around to dealing with the real problem.

3) we blame our circumstances

“I had a bad day.”

Ever used that one?

“I’m sorry, I had a bad day at work...”

“I didn’t get enough sleep.”

Yeah, that’s a good one.

You can be irritable, mean, and nasty—“and it’s not really my fault...!”

Certainly when you are sick or tired it is easier to fall prey to sin.

But sickness, tiredness, or irritability is never an excuse for sin—

neither is it a cause of sin.

Think about an obvious example:

alcohol.

Does alcohol *cause* sin?

No.

When a person is drunk, the alcohol is not responsible for his sin;

rather it lowers his inhibitions and allows the sin in his heart to spring forth.

None of these external factors *cause* sin.

Verse nine diagnoses us correctly:

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Our hearts would convince us that we are not really at fault for our sin.

If that is the case,

then we are also unable to change.

We can’t help it.

We are the way we are.

And we will be this way forever.

So long as we listen to our hearts and put our trust in man,
we will never change.

*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.
Who can understand it?*

The first lesson you need to learn about yourself is that you cannot trust yourself.

That is the lesson of Judah and Jerusalem.
That is why the LORD says to Judah,
in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.

So long as we trust in man, there is no hope.
There is an ironic relationship between blaming others and trusting others.
You might think that a person who blames others for his situation
would be reluctant to trust in man.
But in fact the reason why we blame others is precisely because we *trusted* them,
and they *failed* us.

We thought that getting married would solve our problems—
only to discover that marriage simply created a whole new set of problems!
So we blame our spouse for failing us.
We thought that having a child would make us happy,
but this child quickly added stress and frustration.
So we blame our children for our failures.
We thought that career advancement would bring respect from our peers,
but the promotion only brought heavier expectations and sense of failure.
So we blame others for not respecting us.

If you trust in man—
if you are looking to man for fulfillment and meaning in life—
then when others fail you, your world will collapse.

This is why you will only come to a true knowledge of yourself
when you look into the Word of God,
and allow it to interpret you.

You have put your trust in the flesh—
you have trusted in man,
and just like Jerusalem long ago,
you have reaped the consequences—
you are dwelling in a parched uninhabited wilderness.

b. “A Tree Planted by Water” – The Blessed Man Who Trusts in the LORD (17:7-8)

So what do you do?

You know that the Word of God is the answer,
so you start reading your Bible, you pray, you get involved in church activities.
But nothing changes.

Remember, these two trees are both covenantal trees.
The cursed shrub in the desert is speaking of Judah as well.

Verse 13 speaks of the LORD as the fountain of living water.
And we often think that if we just had more water, then we’d change.
If only we could read our Bibles more and pray more—that would change us, right?!

If you’ve ever been to the southwest, you may have seen the cactus forest of Arizona.
Yes, there is a whole forest of cactus so dense
that if they didn’t create pathways, you could never walk through this forest!
They get a lot of rain in that part of Arizona.
But it all comes at once,
and so ordinary plants cannot survive.
But the cactus thrives because it can soak up immense amounts of water at once,
and then store it for the long dry season.

Adding water does not change the nature of a cactus.
Adding water simply multiplies the number of cacti!

We Reformed types like to emphasize the means of grace.
But the Word, the sacraments, and prayer do not change us automatically.
They only change us by the working of God’s Spirit! –
they only change us *by faith!*
Judah had access to the means of grace.
A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.
But Judah had forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

Too often our “claiming” the promises of God is still “me-centered.”
We want the means of grace to give us what *we* want.

Jeremiah has repeatedly warned Judah that it is not enough to have the temple present.
He had earlier said, “do not say, ‘the temple of God’” –
In other words, do not think that the means of grace will change you by themselves.
You can live in Jerusalem and be a shrub in the desert.

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

So what is the solution?

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.

Jeremiah 17 echoes the same themes as Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
or stand in the way of sinners,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but are like the chaff that the wind drives away.

Jeremiah says that the one who trusts the LORD

*is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its root 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.*

This tree is the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the blessed man who trusted the LORD in all things.

He is the tree of life,

whose leaves bring healing to the nations,
and he never ceases to bear fruit for God's glory.

You see, apart from Jesus, you are a cursed shrub.

But as Calvin puts it, the one who is in Christ

has no business looking at himself apart from Christ!

You have been grafted into him.

Therefore you are no longer who you once were!

Do you realize what this means?

You have been renewed after the image of God.

You have been sanctified – you have been made holy in Christ.

And every time you say to God, “Oh, I am just a miserable sinner,”
he says, “true, but that’s why I sent my Son!”

And when you say, “even my best is but filthy rags”

Jesus says, “true, but I died to cover that as well”

You need to start believing what God says about you!

He says that you are holy!

He says that you are righteous!

(not in yourselves – but *in Christ!*)
God says that in Christ you are righteous – how dare you still think of yourself as guilty?
God says that in Christ you are holy – how dare you still think of yourself as a sinner?
And here's the kicker,
in Christ, you have been grafted in to the tree of life –
how dare you think of yourself as a cursed shrub?

So if you are in Christ, then you have been renewed in the whole man after the image of God.

And that's where part 2 of our catechism comes in:
because of this,
we are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

2. We Are Enabled More and More to Die unto Sin and Live unto Righteousness (1 Corinthians 10)

How do you respond to the heat of life?
If your trust is in men, then in response to the scorching heat of this age,
you will turn away from the LORD.
But if your trust is in the LORD, then you will draw upon the living water
that flows from the heart of Jesus.

Verse 13 says that Judah had *forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water*.
Jesus is the fountain of living water.
If you are in him,
then no matter what your circumstances may look like,
you have hope.
Your circumstances may look like a barren desert,
but in Christ your roots go deep down to the subterranean river of life,
and so no matter what circumstance you face,
you will always find the resources to respond in a way that pleases God

Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 10,
where he comments on Israel in the wilderness,
pointing out that all of them had access to the means of grace:
*all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,
and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.
For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.
Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased,
for they were overthrown in the wilderness.*

Just passing through the Red Sea was not enough.
Partaking of the manna and drinking of the rock was not enough –
even though that Rock was Christ!
The external means of grace are important –

but just getting baptized is not enough!

And Paul says that these things took place as examples for us,
that we might not desire evil as they did.

I was talking over this passage with Nathan Sawatzky this week,
and Nathan pointed out that there is a really helpful structure to verses 6-13:

What was the problem with Israel?

They had evil desires.

What sort of evil desires?

Idolatry was at the heart – loving something else more than God.
And this worked its way out in sexual immorality,
with the result that they put Christ to the test –
and they grumbled against the Lord.

Why does Paul think this is important for us?

Because this is precisely the danger we face.

If we don't get what we want, we grumble and murmur!

And Paul tells us that these things happened to them as examples for us,
on whom the end of the ages has come.

Therefore let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.

*God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability,
but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,
that you may be able to endure it.*

What is the way of escape?

How are we enabled more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness?

You might think that after warning the Corinthians that it was not enough
for Israel to be baptized into Moses

or to eat the manna or drink from the Rock –

that Paul might find some other way to talk about the means of sanctification.

But he comes right back to the sacraments!

When he tells the Corinthians to flee from idolatry,

he urges them to remember what the Lord's Supper really is.

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,

for we all partake of the one bread.

Consider the people of Israel [the same failures he spoke of earlier!] –

are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?” (10:16-18)

Paul urges us to flee from idolatry – and flee to Jesus,
who offers us *himself* as our spiritual nourishment unto everlasting life.

How can you endure temptation?

How can you produce good fruit in the midst of trials and temptations?

It is not enough to pour water on a desert shrub and expect it to become a good tree.

Adding water to a cactus will only produce more cacti.

What we need is a new heart – to be renewed in the whole man after the image of God.

Then – and only then – can we more and more die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

And that is why the whole doctrine of salvation is ground in Christ.

My only hope is that I belong both body and soul, in life and in death,

to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ,

who has freely paid for all my sins with his precious blood,

he also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father,

not a hair can fall from my head,

indeed all things must work together for my salvation;

therefore by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life

and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Grant, Almighty God, that as we in ourselves are less than nothing, we may know our nothingness, and having cast away all confidence in the world as well as in ourselves, we may learn to flee to you, and so put our trust in you for our present life and for eternal salvation, that you alone may be glorified: and may we be devoted to you through the whole course of our life, and so persevere in humility and in calling on your name, that you may bring us help, not only once, but that we may know that you are always present with those who truly and from the heart call upon you, until we shall at length be filled with the fullness of all those blessings, which are laid up for us in heaven by Christ our Lord. Amen.