

“The Greatest Evil in the World”
Jeremiah 17:5-13
January 10, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning today a series of sermons on the gospel-centered life, named after a small group curriculum that many of our groups are following. We begin our study where the gospel must always begin—with human sinfulness. Before we can center ourselves on the gospel, we must agree with the gospel’s assessment of our central problem. If the gospel came to solve the sin problem, but we disagree that sin is much of a problem, then we will not be gospel-centered. The first point of the Bible’s good news is a piece of bad news. Sin is a problem of such profound size that we are powerless before it.

There used to be a common consensus that sin is the central human problem. That is clearly no longer the case. Cornelius Plantinga begins a book on the topic of sin like this.

The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation.

But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays, the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke (*Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, p. ix).

It used to be the case that schoolteachers, along with preachers, were the custodians of morality, helping to train their students to avoid wrong and pursue right. Sociologist James Davison Hunter has pointed out that schoolteachers speak differently now. They are encouraged not to say, “Stop it, please! You’re disturbing the class!” because these are judgmental words. “Instead, to a strong-armed youth who is rattling classroom windows with his tennis ball, educationally correct teachers put a sequence of caring questions: ‘What are you doing? Why are you doing it? How does doing this make you feel?’” (Plantinga, p. x). Hunter points out how the word *sin* appears most commonly on dessert menus, describing some dessert that has a particularly high level of calories.

Jeremiah spoke God’s word to a generation similar to ours. Optimism was at a high level in Israel’s southern kingdom of Judah. Assyria had been the superpower for two centuries, and the greatest threat to Judah’s safety. But now Assyrian power is waning, and Judah can look to the future with greater hope. Jeremiah’s message is essentially this: “Not so fast. You have forsaken your God, and he will surely bring his hand of judgment against you for your sin. I will raise up a new superpower, Babylon, to use as my instrument of judgment against

you.” Jeremiah’s message of sin and judgment was as unpopular as that same message today. But lack of popularity doesn’t make a statement untrue. The central problem of human sinfulness may be an unpopular idea today, but it is still true, just as it was in Jeremiah’s day. Let’s consider what he says now about the sinfulness of the human heart.

I. The Deception of the Human Heart

Jeremiah says that **“the heart is deceitful above all things”** (v. 9). He is using the word *heart* as it is commonly used in the Bible, referring to our innermost thoughts and motives. The heart is what drives you to do what you do. For example, suppose we see someone doing something spiritual such as attending a prayer meeting. We may look at that person and think, “I wish I had a heart for God like that.” But suppose this person is attending the prayer meeting only because there is a young lady he is interested in who also attends the prayer meeting. His heart is really for her rather than for God, because she is the real reason he is coming to the prayer meeting. The heart is that innermost motive driving us to action.

Jeremiah says that at this heart level, at the level of our innermost motives, we are deceitful above all things. If a search were made throughout the entire world for the most deceptive thing in all of God’s creation, nothing could be discovered that would exceed the human heart in the area of deceitfulness. This deceitfulness works in two directions. First, we deceive others in an attempt to make ourselves look good or to control others for our purposes. Second, we deceive ourselves because we see things as we want to see them rather than as they are. We want to look good not only to others, but especially to ourselves, and we naturally deceive ourselves in order to achieve that. We are like those who shoot the arrow first and then draw the bulls-eye around wherever the arrow struck. Our assumption is that if I do it, it must be right.

It’s easy to see this feature of self-deception in extreme cases. George Cadwalader has written a book about juvenile delinquency called *Castaways*. The teenagers he has studied “have been neglected or assaulted by family members and take their vengeance by following a career of casual, almost automatic, thuggery.... But what frightens even professional observers of some of these delinquents is that they carry on their destruction as remorselessly as sharks. Here are rapists, killers, and thieves who appear to lack not only conscience but also emotion” (Plantinga, p. 49). The human heart has such an immense capacity for self-deception that we can be sinning greatly and not even see it.

It may be easier to see this in the case of delinquents who rape and kill without remorse, but it is present to some degree in all of us. I was listening to an interview on the radio this week with a surgeon who had done a study on the effectiveness of using checklists in the operating room, similar to the checklists that pilots use as they do the various things airplane pilots must do. Though this

surgeon could prove that such checklists would reduce the number of errors in the operating room, the vast majority of surgeons resisted their use. I know my own heart well enough to know the reason. I have a bias that if I do it, it must be right. I don't want any external source challenging that, even if it's something as innocuous as a checklist.

The human heart is in such sad shape that Jeremiah says that it is "desperately sick." It is gravely ill, on life support. When an organ fails, it becomes no longer able to perform as it was intended. The human heart was intended for God, to love him and delight in him. But sin has turned it to a manipulative and selfish purpose. Now our innermost desires are away from God and toward self.

II. The Greatest Corruption of the Human Heart

What is it that prompts Jeremiah's negative view of sinful human nature? Just prior to this verse about the exceptional deception of the human heart, he has been talking about the sin of self-trust, contrasted with the virtue of trust in God. The nation of Judah was guilty of that very sin as they were looking to alliances with different nations to protect them, instead of looking to their God. At the very core of their relationship with God was his promise to provide for them and their need to look to him in trust. Instead, they looked to Egypt or other nations. To do so would be like our children getting hungry and instead of asking their parents for food, going door-to-door in the neighborhood to beg for food. Jeremiah sees this sin of self-trust as the greatest corruption of the human heart.

He speaks of it in the familiar language of cursing and blessing. **"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord... Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord"** (v. 5, 7). Trust in man is viewed by many as only a minor problem at worst. Others regard it as a great virtue. But the Bible views it as the source of sin and great trouble. It brings a curse upon us because it makes our heart turn away from the Lord. Jeremiah gives an illustration of trust in man or in God that is very helpful. To trust in man results in living like a shrub in the desert, while trust in God is like the tree planted by the stream. This analogy teaches us three things about this great sin of trusting in man instead of God.

The first thing we learn from this analogy is that the most important matters of life are determined by where we place our trust. The defining difference between the shrub and the tree is the soil where they are planted. We get to choose the soil where we plant our lives, and nothing will define our lives more than the choice we make here. If we trust in ourselves or others, we will be like the shrub in the desert, thirsty, lonely, and barely hanging onto life. If we choose to root our lives deep into the soil of God, through trust in him, then we will be like the tree planted by the stream—without fear and worry, and bearing fruit through all seasons. The defining feature of our lives is not where we go to school,

who our parents are, how much money we have and who we marry. The greatest issue in life will always be where we put our trust.

The second thing we learn from Jeremiah's use of the shrub and the tree as an analogy for trusting in man or in God is that the really important things happen below the surface. Both are subjected to the harsh conditions of life, whether drought or heat. It is what happens below the surface, where the roots are, that makes a difference. The roots of the tree find the abundant waters, with the result that the tree is able to flourish. This is why, when we ask God to help us see our sin, that we must be ready to take a look below the surface. Notice that the two sins Jeremiah mentions, fear and anxiety, both describe what is happening inside of us rather than some external behavior. The one who trusts God, like the tree planted by the river, **"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"** (v. 8). Fear and anxiety indicate the presence of trust in man. So if we would see our sin, we must be on the lookout for these two internal attitudes.

The third truth we learn from Jeremiah's analogy is that the object of our trust is revealed only in the **"year of drought."** If it rained every day, the shrub would continue to flourish. Its shallow roots would not be a problem as long as there was water at that shallow level. But when the drought comes, the only water available is found in the deep springs that never dry up. The tree, on the other hand, continues to flourish in the year of drought, seen in its green leaves and its continued bearing of fruit. In our lives, too, it is the year of drought that reveals where our trust has been placed. Have you ever experienced the year of drought? Maybe you have suffered from the recent economic downturn. Or perhaps there has been some significant sickness in your life. Just before Christmas, all within a couple of days, it seemed that our family was hit by several health-related challenges. Wendy's father was readmitted to the hospital with serious complications after his bladder removal surgery. Kathryn had shoulder surgery, during which she found out that the damage to her shoulder was worse than was first thought. And then Matthew calls us to tell us that he had just sliced off the end of his thumb while slicing sweet potatoes for something he was cooking. I know that many of you have been through illnesses far worse than any of those, but it still felt a bit overwhelming to have these things happen in such quick succession. Trust in man for me looks like denial, in which I just try to keep moving forward and not think about things. The year of drought exposes where we have placed our trust.

III. God's Response to the Human Heart

God responds to the sinful human heart in two ways. First, he brings judgment. **"I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways"** (v. 10). One of the ways religious people trust in man rather than God is the attempt to control God by our obedience. The thinking is

that if I keep the rules, then I obligate God to bless me. But the religious person trusting himself is maintaining the right to his own agenda rather than submitting to God's agenda. He wants God to bless his agenda. God's judgment is a reassertion of his control.

The form taken by God's judgment is communicated through the illustration of a bird that lays claim to eggs she did not hatch. But after the eggs hatch and the young birds grow some, the deception is exposed when they leave their pretending mother. God's judgment often takes the form of allowing things to take their normal course. Notice the concluding words of verse 11. **"At his end he will be a fool."** The problem is that it is not exposed until the end, when there will be only shame. When people trust in themselves instead of God, he simply turns them over to their own resources, and nothing more. Those who trust in money are allowed to come to the natural end of such trust, finding it to be empty and powerless to address the real needs of the human heart.

There is a second response God makes here to human sinfulness. The last phrase of verse 13 contains a wonderful promise in a description it gives of God. He is **"the fountain of living water."** *Living* water in the Bible means moving water such as occurs in a stream or spring. Its contrast is standing water such as appears in a pool. The significance of living water is that there is always more available. It won't run out, no matter how much is used. God is the stream of water by which the tree is planted. How is it that we plant ourselves by this stream so that we can flourish in its nourishment? There is a hint of an answer in verse 12: **"A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary."** The sanctuary is a reference to the temple. It was the place of sacrifice, where animals were slain in payment for sins. Jesus is the sacrifice to whom we look, and we do so through repentance and confession of our sins.

CONCLUSION:

One of the sports videos played this past summer showed a man in the stands catching a home run hit by a major league baseball player. After doing so, he handed the baseball to his daughter, who looked to be five or six years old. Not understanding what a prize she had in her hands, she promptly threw the ball back on the field. Such a loss, right? Well, that's not the end of the story. I understand that some of the players on that team saw that incident on TV and decided to give this father and his daughter an autographed baseball and bat. Confession of sin feels like such a loss to us—loss of reputation or of the sense that everything is okay with us. But when we take our sins to Jesus, it turns out not to be a loss, but a far greater gain as it gives us abundant life from the one who is the fountain of living water.