

Two Evils and Two Images

Jeremiah 2:13

I almost titled this sermon “An Encouraging Word about Sin,” but I didn’t because I thought it might be misleading. Sometimes people use the word “encouraging” to mean little more than “nice”; an encouraging person is a nice person who never makes you feel bad. But I had in mind a more robust, biblical concept of encouragement: encouragement gives you the courage to do the will of God in a specific circumstance. That encouragement may or may not make you feel good; but the effect is to give you courage to do what God wants.

One of the places where we need the most courage is when we consider our own sin. It’s so easy to become dis-couraged and dis-heartened when it comes to our sin - the things we’ve done that displease God. We need courage to see our sin for what it is. Courage will give us hope (see Romans 15:4) and will prompt us to turn back to God instead of merely feeling condemned. With that understanding I trust that this message will be an encouraging word about sin.

Today as we continue our sermon series in the book of Jeremiah we are going to look at two evils and two images. The two evils are given in Jeremiah 2:13. This verse that gives an insightful, memorable description of persistent, habitual sin. Judah hadn’t merely messed up a time or two. She had habitually, persistently sinned over a long period of time. Jeremiah 2:13 describes Judah’s sin as “***two evils***.” Then we’ll broaden our scope and discuss ***two images*** that Jeremiah uses to describe the sin of the people. These images (adultery and idolatry) will help us diagnose our sin as well as point to the proper remedy for our sin. As you know, if you misdiagnose something, you’ll go after the wrong remedy; these images should give us some helpful clarity on our sin.

Two Evils (Jeremiah 2:13) This verse summarizes Judah’s sin in a very interesting, memorable way:

13 “For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.”

The imagery of this verse would have made perfect sense to any landowner in Jeremiah’s day. If you had a piece of land, the best case scenario would be to have a spring/fountain that supplied a steady stream of fresh, cool water for your family and for your livestock. But if you didn’t have a spring/fountain on your land, your next best option was to dig a well/cistern. You would plaster the bottom and sides of the well so that it would hold water. When it rained, you would direct the water into the well so that you could draw water when you needed it. But if the well wouldn’t hold water, it was worthless.

Jeremiah's message from God to the people of Judah was that they had abandoned the best-case scenario and had adopted the worst-case scenario. The first evil, God said, was that "They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters."

To "forsake" something is to abandon it or leave it behind. That's what the people had done with God. Instead of being devoted to God and instead of trusting Him for their protection, they abandoned Him; they worshiped other gods and trusted in nations for their protection. Earlier in the chapter God reminded them how devoted they had been to Him when He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Jeremiah 2:2-3):

2. . . "I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.
3 "Israel was holy to the Lord,
The first of His harvest.
All who ate of it became guilty;
Evil came upon them," declares the Lord.' "

There was a time when Israel was devoted to God; but in the days of Jeremiah they abandoned Him. The tragedy was that God was "a fountain of living waters" - which is a way of saying that God was their continuous source of life. When they walked with Him, they experienced an abundance of life. But in Jeremiah's day they had abandoned Him, their only source of life.

Of course the same dynamics are at play when we abandon God in some way through our sin. Jesus' promise to His disciples in John 7:38-39 reminds us of Jeremiah 2:13. Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" John's comment was that Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit "whom those who believe in Him were to receive." The Holy Spirit is the personal presence of Jesus and the Father. As we "walk by the Spirit" or "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25 - NASB, NIV) we experience life - which is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit of the Spirit (Paul's designation in Galatians 5:22-23) is evidence of these "rivers of living water" that Jesus described in John 7 and God described in Jeremiah 2:13.

The deception of sin (and this goes all the way back to the Garden) is that God wants to limit us with picky regulations and unreasonable demands. The deception is that God stifles life and sin delivers life. If you aren't experiencing the life that God offers, you may feel the most alive when you're indulging in some sin; at least you're feeling something! But Jeremiah 2:13 cuts through the deception and exposes the truth: ***when we abandon God in some area of our lives we are really cutting ourselves off from the source of life.*** To be clear, I'm not speaking in absolute terms here; I'm not saying that every random sin cuts us off from God's life that flows from the Holy Spirit. I'm

thinking of something analogous to what had happened in Jeremiah's day in which God's people had persistently, willfully rejected certain aspects of God's holiness.

Can you think of areas of your life in which you have willfully and persistently (over time) sinned? Are there patterns of sin that have become so engrained in your flesh that you've basically learned how to live with that sin instead of putting it aside? If that's the case, Jeremiah 2:13 gives you a powerful way to conceptualize what's happened. The first evil you have committed, God says, is that in this area of your life "you have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters." That's a sobering diagnosis of sin, isn't it?

The second evil further exposes the foolishness of sin.

13 "For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water."

Through their rebellion they had abandoned an inexhaustible source of life in favor of a lifeless alternative. It's as if they had plugged up the spring that flowed from the side of the hill and dug a cistern/well that wouldn't hold water. They could direct rain water into that well every time it rained; but instead of providing a reservoir of water from which they could later draw, it consumed water because it was "broken." Sin promises life, but it actually consumes life; it drains our vitality from us. Sin leaves us feeling weak and numb and lethargic instead of feeling alive. Sinful habits leave us in a worst-case scenario.

If you are trapped or enslaved in some sin (even if it's pleasurable), you know what God is saying here. Next week we're going to look at the remedy; we'll talk about turning from our sin and turning back to God. We'll see that God makes an amazing offer to every single one of us. But this morning I want us to continue diagnosing the disease. To do so we are going to consider two images from the book of Jeremiah.

Two images (two other ways that God describes sin). These two images reinforce the perspective that our sin is very, very foolish. The first image is that of "adultery."

Adultery (Jer. 2:20-25, 3:1-11, Hosea 1:2, 2:1-13, 2 Cor. 11:2) Listen to just a few verses from Jeremiah that describe Judah abandoning God as spiritual adultery. The first of the Ten Commandments was "You shall have no other gods before Me." When the people worshiped the gods of the surrounding peoples (e.g. Baal), they were committing adultery; they were "cheating" on the one, true, living God.

In Jeremiah 2:20 God makes reference to the people worshiping Baal. Baal worship involved ritual prostitution. Men who were supposed to be faithful to YHWH were having relations with prostitutes on hilltops and under trees.

20 “For long ago I broke your yoke
And tore off your bonds;
But you said, ‘I will not serve!’
For on every high hill
And under every green tree
You have lain down as a harlot.

Look at Jeremiah 3:6-8.

6 Then the Lord said to me in the days of Josiah the king, “Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. 7 “I thought, ‘After she has done all these things she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8 “And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also.

This is essentially the plot of the book of Hosea. God had the prophet Hosea marry a prostitute as a living parable of how He felt being in relationship with Israel. God felt like a man whose wife wouldn’t quit cheating on him.

God is showing His heart by labeling persistent, habitual sin adultery. God wants us to understand how God feels about that type of unfaithfulness. If you’re not really “into” feelings and relational dynamics, this may be very difficult for you. But the fact remains that God is a personal being. God is not a set of propositions. God is not an idea. God is a personal being and when we are unfaithful to Him, He feels like a husband whose wife just won’t quit cheating on him.

Is there some area of your life that you are not submitting to God – your thought life, a relationship, your career? Are there things that are more important to you than God – money, reputation, power, intellect? When we have other gods (small “g”) in our lives – things that we substitute for Him – it’s spiritual adultery. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul used the same imagery:

2 For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.

Those who know Jesus are collectively called the bride of Christ; we’ve been betrothed to Him. One day we’ll enjoy the “marriage feast of the Lamb.” Just as it’s not unreasonable for a person to expect his/her fiancée to remain faithful, Jesus expects us to be faithful to Him until that day.

Philip Yancey points out that when you read the Old Testament, the face of God was streaked with tears; He was absolutely heart-broken over His people’s unfaithfulness (*Disappointment with God*, p. 91). His face was streaked with tears because of relational pain, not because they broke His rules.

The imagery of sin as adultery can be powerful because that imagery confronts our rationalizations and justifications about sin. When we say, “God, if you only knew how powerful my temptations are. . . .” God says, “Actually, I do understand. My one and only Son took on flesh and blood and became one of you; He was tempted just as you are, yet He didn’t cheat on Me. He was faithful as a Son. Through Jesus I understand the power of your temptation. But do you understand that I feel like a man whose wife won’t quit cheating on him?” This imagery can help us quit thinking about ourselves long enough to think about God and how He experiences our sin. If we’re ever going to put away some sin it will require a God-centered (not self-centered) approach.

The second image is that of idolatry. Whereas the imagery of adultery emphasizes our sin is a personal offense against God, the imagery of idolatry emphasizes how we view the sin itself: our sin has assumed a place that should be reserved for God; we are treating our sin the way we should be treating God.

Idolatry (Jer. 2:26-28, 10:1-18, Col. 3:5, 1 John 5:21) An idol is often called a “God substitute.” The physical idol made of wood or stone represented a god that promised protection or blessing. But in passages such as Jeremiah 2:26–28 God mocks the idolatry as worthless to deliver.

26 “As the thief is shamed when he is discovered,
So the house of Israel is shamed;
They, their kings, their princes
And their priests and their prophets,
27 Who say to a tree, ‘You are my father,’
And to a stone, ‘You gave me birth.’
For they have turned *their* back to Me,
And not *their* face;
But in the time of their trouble they will say,
‘Arise and save us.’
28 “But where are your gods
Which you made for yourself?
Let them arise, if they can save you
In the time of your trouble;
For *according to* the number of your cities
Are your gods, O Judah.

Just like a broken cistern that doesn’t hold water, an idol won’t save you “in the time of your trouble.” God was telling them, “If you are going to sacrifice to idols and believe that they will give you prosperity and fertility and satisfaction in the good times, don’t come running back to Me when the Babylonians show up at the gates of Jerusalem.” In other words, God didn’t want to be merely one “god” in their pantheon. That’s why the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). That’s why He told them, “I am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5); it’s appropriate for a husband to be jealous for the exclusive love of his wife and it was appropriate for YHWH to be jealous for His people. Or (to change the imagery a bit) the Creator and Sustainer of the universe really doesn’t want to be part of anybody’s harem.

You may be thinking, “I’m relieved to know that there’s a whole category of sin that has no appeal to me. Come check my apartment/house/dorm room and you won’t find any idols or shrines.” Maybe, maybe not. It’s possible for a television to be a God-substitute; it’s conceivable that a person might sacrifice family and friends in order to watch TV; it’s conceivable that you’re more devoted to watching the nightly news than seeking God; it’s conceivable that watching one more TV show will satisfy your soul more than spending time in the presence of God. You might be able to say something similar about another physical object - whether a house or a car or a workshop.

The New Testament applies the language of idolatry to less tangible things - such as specific sins. The thought seems to be that just as people in Jeremiah’s day in reality worshiped the god behind the idol, we tend to worship something deeper than a television or a car or a house. We tend to worship things like “money, sex, and power.” The NT specifically singles out money and what it represents. In Colossians 3:5 Paul writes:

5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

There Paul says that greed amounts to idolatry - presumably because you are trusting in money to do what God should do (give you security and significance), you are sacrificing things you shouldn’t be sacrificing to get money (family, relationships, health, sanity), and you are really serving money (your money/possessions control you instead of you controlling it).

As I mentioned earlier, there is power in using biblical terminology such as idolatry (if indeed it’s accurate in your case). It’s one thing to say, “I struggle with lust,” but it’s quite another to say, “I’ve actually made sensuality an idol in my life. I pursue it more than I seek God, I sacrifice for it, and I expect it to give me life.” If you recognize that your greed or your lust or your anger has become an idol, then you’ll pay attention to what Jeremiah says about your sin: it cannot give you life and it cannot save you when you’re in trouble.

This week, I pray that you and I have the courage to see our sin for what it is. And it might take a tremendous amount of courage to admit, “I’ve been skulking around in the shadows, cheating on God” or “My sensuality is really an idol in my life.” It will take a tremendous amount of courage to “own” that you have abandoned God in some area of your life, that you’ve walked away from the life He wants to give you, and that you’ve spent time and energy nurturing some sin that leaves you lifeless. But unless you name your sin and see it for what it is, you can’t really turn from it. And that’s what we’re going to talk about next week from Jeremiah 3.