

A Standing Offer
Jeremiah 3:11-14

I've driven from Manhattan to Wichita and back many, many times. Brenda has family in Wichita and our daughter is in school there, so we make that trip quite regularly. A highlight of this exciting drive is the roundabout in Florence at the intersection of Hwy 77 and Hwy 50. Last fall I was driving back from Wichita. I drove up to Newton and east on Hwy 50. When I got to the roundabout at Florence I wasn't paying attention. Instead of driving around the roundabout and heading north to Junction City, I got off an exit early and kept heading east on 50. After about 2 minutes I realized that I didn't recognize anything. I realized I was on the wrong road going the wrong direction.

I did the obvious thing: I pulled over, turned around and headed the opposite direction. Or to use biblical terminology, I repented. If you're on a path that's headed away from God and you turn around and go back toward God, you've repented. Repentance isn't merely feeling badly that you've wandered from God; repentance involves actually turning back to God in heart and in deed. That's what we're going to talk about today.

Last week we saw from Jeremiah 2:13 how God described the people willfully, persistently walking away from Him:

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."

They not only abandoned God as the true source of life; the lifestyle they adopted left them thirsty and empty. We also talked about two images used in Jeremiah to describe their sin: spiritual adultery and idolatry. The people had offended God in the most personal and extreme way possible.

If you didn't know anything to the contrary, you might think that people who had sinned in such spectacular ways wouldn't have a chance with God. But we read in Jeremiah that God was more than willing to forgive them ***if they turned back to Him in repentance***. We are going to see this morning from Jeremiah 3:11–14 that God invites the most rebellious among us simply to turn back to Him.

A Standing Offer from God: "Turn back to Me and you'll experience My grace and lovingkindness." (Jeremiah 3:11-14)

Last week we read several verses from chapter 3 in which God expressed His dismay that the southern kingdom of Judah had imitated the sins of the northern kingdom of Israel. Instead of being warned by Israel's exile, Judah proved to be more rebellious than Israel.

11 And the Lord said to me, "Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.

Even though Israel (the northern kingdom) had been sent into exile in Assyria, she was (by comparison) "more righteous than treacherous Judah." And so (verse 12) God commands Jeremiah to invite Israel to return to Him. Even though this invitation was to Israel, similar offers will be made to Judah - both in Jeremiah's day and in the future (even after they'd returned from exile). In other words, this invitation represents the standing offer that God makes to every single person - even you and me.

12 "Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say,
'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the Lord;
'I will not look upon you in anger.
For I am gracious,' declares the Lord;
'I will not be angry forever.

The basic invitation (and command) was to "return" to God. They didn't merely need to feel horrible about their sin. "Returning to God" in their situation meant that they would quit cheating on God and put away their idols. In other words repentance involves a change of heart that actually shows up in a person's actions. By the grace of God you actually change directions.

Last week's passage urged us to have a God-centered understanding of our sin; we need to understand the personal, relational pain that our sin causes the heart of God (this is suggested by the imagery of sin as spiritual adultery). In a similar way, we need a God-centered understanding of repentance. The only reason we can repent is because of the character of God. Specifically, this verse stresses that God is gracious and "will not be angry forever."

Nine times in the OT we read the refrain that "the Lord is slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6, Num. 14:18, Ps. 86:15, Joel 2:13, etc.). It takes a LOT to make Him angry. If you think that God is hot-headed and that He loves being angry, you'll be reluctant to turn back to Him after you've sinned. But the fact that He is slow to anger and that He "will not be angry forever" should make us eager to return to Him.

And God wants us to know that He is "gracious" - He lavishly pours grace upon His people. Yes, God withholds His grace from people who won't receive it. Yes, God does get angry at our actions at times. Like any responsible person, He treats people differently based on the circumstances; and His emotions are affected by how we treat Him. But His default position is to be gracious and kind. We should never think, "Because of my sin I can't turn back to God because He's too angry and too stingy." God really is like the father in the parable of the prodigal son: He longs for his children to come home.

Joel 2:13 makes this same connection between God's character and our returning to Him:

13 And rend your heart and not your garments.”
Now return to the Lord your God,
For He is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness
And relenting of evil.

Under the old covenant, even though there were severe consequences for prolonged, persistent rebellion God was gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness. If that was true under the old covenant, can there be any doubt that the same is true under the new covenant in Jesus' blood?!?! I love what Edward Welch says when he writes:

Turn to Him; He delights in forgiving. It makes Him famous when people understand that He forgives in ways no one could have guessed.
(*Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, p. 169)

A God-centered approach to repentance will realize that God is glorified in both the seen and the unseen world (see Ephesians 3:10, 1 Timothy 1:16-17) when He lavishes grace on us and when we turn back to Him. He really does delight in forgiving.

Back to Jeremiah 3. . . . Verse 13 mentions a foundational way that we return back to God: by acknowledging ways that we've strayed from Him.

13 'Only acknowledge your iniquity,
That you have transgressed against the Lord your God
And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree,
And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the Lord.

Interestingly, the term translated “acknowledge” is found over 900x in the OT; over 600x it is translated “to know.” I definitely think that God is calling them to “acknowledge” their iniquity to Him; but that acknowledgment/confession of sin is based on them genuinely knowing what they've done. God wasn't looking for a vague, undefined “I'm sorry”; and He certainly wasn't looking for the people to say, “I'm sorry that You're so upset over my sin!” God wanted them to own up to what they'd done and who they'd become.

“Iniquity” is one of several words used in the OT for sin. It's hard to make hard and fast distinctions between them, but “iniquity” has the connotation of “crooked” or “perverse.” Whereas God's ways are described as the “straight and narrow way,” sin involves crooked or perverse paths. Through our iniquity we have left the path that leads to life in favor of crooked paths that lead to death. And so when we “acknowledge our iniquity” we come out and admit as much. We don't try to make ourselves look better than we are; we quit hiding and we quit making excuses. We come out and admit to God that we've strayed from Him.

Specifically, God brings up the issue of spiritual adultery again: You *have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree*. Last week I mentioned that Baal

worship involved ritual prostitution that took place on hilltops and under trees. God wanted them to acknowledge specifically that they had been unfaithful to Him.

As we mentioned last week, before you can turn from your sin you have to understand it and even “name” it - whether it’s spiritual adultery or idolatry or pride. “Acknowledging our iniquity” might not be a quick, easy prayer that you pray - especially if you’re dealing with habitual sin or even an addiction. Day by day by day you will need to turn back to God in repentance.

In the context of Jeremiah 3 and the northern kingdom of Israel that had gone into exile, God promises to restore them to the Land.

14 ‘Return, O faithless sons,’ declares the Lord;
‘For I am a master to you,
And I will take you one from a city and two from a family,
And I will bring you to Zion.’

The exile would be reversed: instead of being removed from the land, they would be gathered from various cities and returned to the land. When we turn back to God we experience restoration as well. This doesn’t mean there are no consequences for our sin (in Jeremiah’s day the consequences were severe - i.e., exile); and we can’t predict exactly what those consequences will be. And so we trust in God’s character: He really is slow to anger, gracious, and abounding in lovingkindness.

Application:

In light of what we’ve seen in Jeremiah, let’s talk about the application for us when we need to turn back to God in some way.

We “turn back to God” by admitting we have sinned against Him. (Psalm 51, Psalm 73) As we discussed earlier, we need to understand and admit that our sin has grieved God’s heart (not merely that “I blew it” or “I messed up”). As we saw in verse 13, we are to acknowledge that we have “transgressed ***against the Lord [our] God***” and that we have been unfaithful ***to Him*** and that we haven’t obeyed ***His voice***.

The great thing is that we have numerous examples of what it looks like to admit/ confess to God that we have sinned against Him. Psalm 51 records how David gave a thorough, comprehensive accounting of his sin after he had sinned with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed in battle.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

David didn’t try to protect himself by pushing his sin to the back of his mind; he said, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” This is the opposite of sweeping it under the rug. And notice how he takes full responsibility for what he’d

done: he calls it **my** transgressions and **my** sin. Verse 4 is perhaps the most striking verse in the whole psalm:

4 Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

David had sinned against many other people. We aren't really told so, but I suspect that eventually David admitted to Bathsheba that he had sinned against her. I suspect David eventually admitted to his commanders that he had sinned against them by commanding them to abandon one of their best soldiers on the battlefield. But ultimately his actions were an offense to God. Ultimately David answered to his God. This doesn't minimize the offense against others involved; rather, it heightens David's accountability to God. And so he confessed to God, "Against You, **You only**, I have sinned, and done what is evil in **Your** sight. . ." Admitting that he had sinned **against** God was necessary because he was returning **to** God.

The same thing is true for you and me: unless we admit that we've sinned against God, we won't really return to Him. We may feel horrible about our sin, but we won't turn back **to Him**. Honestly, this is something that I often don't "get" on a practical level. I'm a lot more apt to see how I've sinned against other people (my wife or a friend or the person who pulls up beside me at an intersection and blocks my view of oncoming traffic!). But sinning against God (who is invisible) often seems very theoretical and remote.

This is where our theology needs to become very practical. We need to remember that God is not only a personal Being who wants a love relationship with us; He is also our Lord/Master. In other words, we shouldn't treat Him as our "little helper" or a "resource"; we should look to Him as our Master. Jesus said, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46)

You may simply need to admit, "God, I've basically been ignoring what you say about anger (or about sexual sins or about greed). I haven't been submitting to Your wisdom and Your authority. I have preferred the passing pleasures of sin over obedience to You." I'd encourage you to take the time necessary to get clear about how your specific sin has offended God.

[You might also read through Psalm 73 sometime. In this psalm Asaph talked with God about the sin he secretly loved. He actually admitted to God that he was jealous of "the wicked" and their prosperity; it looked like there was no benefit in walking with God. He even admitted that he had become senseless and ignorant like a beast. But eventually Asaph entered into God's presence and became convinced, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!"]

We "turn back to God" through specific acts of repentance (Jeremiah 4:1, Luke 3:8). When I was heading the wrong direction on Hwy 50, I didn't merely feel bad and

keep going the wrong direction. I needed to pull over, turn around, and head the right direction. In the same way, when we realize that we're headed the wrong direction, we need to take concrete, specific steps to head in the right direction. After we admit to God that we've sinned against Him, we turn back to Him through specific acts of repentance.

In numerous passages Jeremiah fleshed out what it mean to turn back to God. In Jeremiah 4:1 God says this:

1 "If you will return, O Israel," declares the Lord,
"Then you should return to Me.
And if you will put away your detested things from My presence,
And will not waver . . .

They not only needed to acknowledge that they had "scattered their favors to strangers under every green tree." They also needed to "put away their detested things" from God's presence. They needed to get rid of their idols. Turning back to God involved specific acts of repentance.

When John the Baptist talked to the crowds who came to be baptized by him at the Jordan River, he told them (Luke 3:8) ". . . bear fruits in keeping with repentance. . . ." Repentance (turning back to God) involved actually living differently. This meant different things for different people (whether sharing a tunic or food with someone in need, not collecting more taxes than they'd been ordered, or being content with their wages).

In the same way, our repentance will involve living differently. I'm not saying that you will simply be able to decide to live differently; if you have patterns of sin that are deeply ingrained in your thinking, your emotions, and your body repentance will probably be a process that takes a lot of prayer, study, conversation, and time. I'm not suggesting that you simply promise God you'll never sin again. And I'm not suggesting that if you're really serious about repentance that you'll be able to turn back to God on your own (with no help from anybody else); if you're really serious about repentance you will **have** to involve others in the body of Christ. What I am saying is that repentance will involve doing specific things (it's not merely an emotion).

You may decide, "As an expression of repentance I am going to confess my sin to someone I trust. Instead of hiding it, I'm going to bring it out into the light." In this way you're putting yourself in a position to receive grace from God. Or you may decide, "I'm going to memorize a verse of Scripture and ponder it throughout the day: 'Abstain from fleshly lusts that wage war against the soul'" (1 Peter 2:11). In this way you're adopting a discipline that will help you learn to think about your sin the way God does. Or you may decide, "As an act of repentance I'm going to avoid the people and circumstances that I **know** will lead me to sin." I hope these examples give you some ideas about how turning back to God involves specific acts of repentance.

A final thought: *The goal isn't merely "not sinning"; the goal is knowing and experiencing God (Jeremiah 9:23-24).*

If we merely clean up our behavior but don't experience God we become like the Pharisees. They got pretty good at not sinning in certain ways, but they completely missed God. As we'll see next week in Jeremiah 9, God wants and expects His people to know Him.

Knowing (and therefore loving) God is ultimately our only hope for sustained obedience. We need to be more enamored with God than we are with some sin. Perhaps you've heard this quote from C.S. Lewis:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

(Weight of Glory and Other Addresses, p. 2)

Eventually we need to get to the place where we experience so much pleasure in knowing God that our idols and our spiritual adulteries seem like "making mud pies in a slum." In Psalm 16 David said, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

This pleasurable knowledge of God will fuel a life of obedience. As it's been said, "When God looks good sin looks bad." Next week we'll discuss the importance of knowing God and seeing that He really is good.