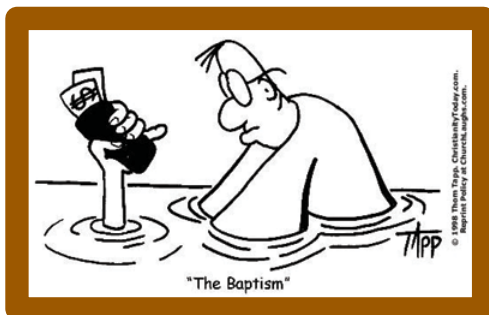


REPENTANCE THAT COUNTS

16th March 2020

Readings: Jeremiah 34:8-17

Over the years many of us have heard these words “I’m a changed woman” or “I’m a changed man”. And when we do sometimes, we wonder if it’ll last. Sometimes it does last and sometimes it doesn’t. So, what are some of the indicators that change will last? One key indicator is finances. Does our encounter with God change our attitude too, and practice with, money? In the positive, think Barnabas who in Acts sold his land and gave the money to the fledging church. In the negative look at this cartoon. It’s of someone being baptised and fully immersed except for his hand sticking up out of the water grasping his wallet. “Everything, I give to you O Lord, except my money.”



You see, genuine repentance impacts all of our lives. Not just church going and the like, but in everyday things like our relationships, our words, our actions and our money. And today we’re going to see just this. Finally, after years of Jeremiah being ignored, the king and people of Jerusalem repent. Not only do they turn back to God’s ways, but it hits them in the wallet. Yes, it costs them, and they still repent. And it bodes well. But will it last?

Let’s pray

We pick up Jeremiah’s story in chapter 34 where Jeremiah receives a Word for the king and wealthy of Jerusalem. Helpfully we’re given the background – beginning from verse 8

The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. Everyone was to free his Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Jew in bondage. Jeremiah 34:8–9

This is great news - especially if you’re a slave. Now, a word about slaves in Bible days. If someone got themselves into financial straits there was no bankruptcy option. If friends or family couldn’t bail you out, then you’d have to sell yourself as a slave to pay off your debt. However, God’s Word was clear that Jewish slaves were not slaves for life but to be released in their seventh year of service. Not only this

but the owner was to give the released slave a bit of helping hand, a financial boost, to help get them back on their feet.

However, this all came at a cost to the slave owner. I mean, why set a perfectly good asset free when you have to turn around and buy another one. A modern-day example is something like this: think of a small car fleet of say, five cars in a medium business. Now the owner's policy is after 20,000 km give the car away. Now, this is stupid. A, the cars has way more life left in then so why get rid of them. And B, why give them away? Why not sell them? It's exactly the same with God's merciful law towards slaves. It makes no financial sense. Why get rid of a perfectly healthy slave when they've plenty of working life left in them. And when you do get rid of them, sell them don't give them away! So, for a long-time wealthy people had ignored God's law for their financial advantage

So, why now this change of heart? Why are the slave owners willing to suffer a hit to their wallet when they've been so reluctant before? Well, for at least for two reasons. Jeremiah's ministry and the Babylonian siege. Jeremiah had long warned that unless they repent God would send the Babylonians and now the Babylonians were laying siege to the city. It's clear to everyone that it's only a matter of time before the city is destroyed. They've run out of military and political options so why not give this repentance thing a go? Money in the bank means nothing if you're enslaved or dead by the hands of the Babylonians, verse 10

So all the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free. Jeremiah 34:10

Notice again the word covenant. A covenant is at the core of the action. So the people enter a solemn legal agreement with God to free their slaves. As sign of repentance and in obedience to God's Word

Now it's worth spending some time looking at the legal process that's described in verse 19. I mean, how was the covenant signed off?

The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf. Jeremiah 34:19.

Bear with me as this explanation will get very strange and a little gory. In Biblical days covenants were often made between a powerful king and lesser king or kings. Between a powerful tribe and a lesser tribe or tribes. Once the terms were agreed there was a ceremony. Now, part of this ceremony included, killing and splitting in half one or more animals. These halves were carefully laid out and representatives of the lesser nation or tribe would walk between the dead animals saying, "If we do not keep this covenant may we be like these animals - torn apart." Very graphic. Very powerful. And this was the equivalent of us signing a legal agreement today.

You know when you get a legal document with post-it arrows pointing to where to sign. You might say a covenant is signed in blood.

So, the court officials, the priests and wealthy had made a solemn agreement with God, walking between a dead calf saying, “May this happen to us, may we be split apart, if we do not release our Hebrew slaves”.

So, all is well and good until verse 11...

But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again. Jeremiah 34:11

This does not bode well, does it? You’ve got to feel nervous for them. They’d walked between a dead calf, in the temple, before God saying, “Let us be ripped apart like this animal if we do not keep our word”. And so now they are without excuse. What do you think God’s going to do?

But before we look at God’s response consider this, “What possessed the slave owners to change their mind? What was their motivation after they had signed off on a covenant written in blood? The answer is, in brief... money.

You see the king of Egypt and his army had gathered at the boarder of Israel to challenge the Babylonians. Faced with this greater threat the Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem to face off with the Egyptians. With Jerusalem now free the wealthy got to thinking - “I sure miss my slaves”. And because the wealthy have influence and ex-slaves don’t and because the wealthy have resources and ex-slaves have none, the status quo was quickly restored.

This then is the context for God’s Word to his people. Verse 12...

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, ‘Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrew who has sold himself to you. After he has served you six years, you must let him go free. Jeremiah 34:12–14

God begins by referencing an earlier covenant, one of the five major, overarching Biblical covenants we’ve looked at earlier. And the symbol of the Covenant with Moses and God’s people was the law. And after the ten commandments, do you know what laws followed? Instructions about slaves. This order is important. The ten commandments followed by how God wants his people to treat your slaves - with mercy. And by giving the slave laws prominence, placed straight after the big 10, God’s reminding his people that they were once slaves. And by making the Israelites show exceptional kindness to their slaves, God is reminding them of the

exceptional kindness he shows them. “I was kind to you while you were slaves in Egypt so be kind to your slaves now? And this leads onto verse 14...

Your fathers, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to his countrymen. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. Jeremiah 34:14–15

We are reminded that the wealthy had long disobeyed God’s law but recently they’d repented and did the right thing - even making a solemn promise in the form of a covenant. But verse 16...

But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again. Jeremiah 34:16

So, like an expert prosecution lawyer before a jury God has laid out his case. A case watertight, unanswerable and without defence. And now God moves from prosecution to judgement. Verse 17...

“Therefore, this is what the Lord says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the Lord—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth.” Jeremiah 34:17

And just before you think this is a bit harsh, remember these are the same people who allowed child sacrifice in their midst. They either practiced it or were complicit. And as God’s judgment continues, he references their covenant agreement... vs 18

The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. Jeremiah 34:18–20

God will follow through with the covenant agreement. They said, “May we be like this carcass if we break the covenant”. And God says, “Let it be as you have said. You will die at the hands of the Babylonians”.

And to finish God explains this judgement in detail. Verse 21

“I will hand Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials over to their enemies who seek their lives, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. I am going to give the order, declares the Lord, and I will bring them back to this city. They will fight against it, take it and burn it down. And I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there.” Jeremiah 34:21–22

You see, it was God who caused the siege to be lifted as a test of their repentance. The people failed the test, exposing their true motives – greed and self interest. So, God will bring the Babylonians back for their final defeat.

And there we have it. It's such a Jeremiah story! The people finally listen to him and repent but quickly recant. Motives of self-interest and self-serving are exposed while the poor and marginalised - the slaves - are mere victims of greed

And there are a whole bunch of implications for us. Three we'll consider this morning

1. Impact of Money on Faith

First do not underestimate the impact of money on our faith. Jesus made it clear when he said... Luke 16:3

“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Luke 16:13

Now the Bible has much to say about money but at its core, money is a tool that helps us honour God and bless others. However, like the slave owners in Jeremiah's day money often money becomes a tool for us to honour our ego and bless ourselves abundantly.

Yes, a love of money will eat away and skew our faith so when God's tests us we'll be found destitute. Maybe even like the Pharisees who straight after Jesus' words about money we read in Luke 16:13

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

(Jesus) said to them, “... God knows your hearts. What is valued among men is detestable in God's sight” Luke 16:14–15

2. God's Heart for the Poor and Marginalised

The next implication is God's heart for the poor and marginalised. What do I mean by this? Well, all through the Bible we see God choose, bless and lift up the weak over the strong, the poor over the rich, the discarded over the influential. We see this in God's law where kind treatment to slaves is prioritised. We see this in

Jeremiah where God's so angered by mistreatment of slaves that he pronounces the most severe judgement. And we see this in the ministry of Jesus who was always getting into trouble with the pillars of society for hanging out with the dregs of society. Luke 15:1-2 is so typical of our Lord.

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:1-2

And this heart for the poor needs to be reflected in our lives. A heart for the marginalised needs to be reflected in the life of the church. Are we making life more difficult for the marginalised in Cromwell? If so, stop it! Are we neglecting to help the marginalised in our town? If so, then like Jesus must be proactive.

3. Covenants are Sealed in Blood

And finally, we see covenants are sealed in blood. We sign off our legal agreements in ink, not so with covenants. In the Bible, blood seals the deal. The covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 was the same, with animals torn in two as the sign-off, as did the covenant we've looked at today. And we remember that this spilt blood is a way of saying, "If I break the covenant then let this happen to me".

And this brings us to the new covenant that we're under. The covenant we remember and renew each time we take communion. For Jesus said in Luke 22:20

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Luke 22:20

And because we can't keep this covenant, because we break it so often, Jesus said, "Let me shed my blood instead of you. Let me suffer instead of you. Instead of you being torn in two when you fail to keep my covenant let any punishment you deserve fall on me."

It's like we've walked between a lamb torn in two and then broken the covenant and instead of us being torn in two Jesus comes and says, "Let me take the punishment you deserve on myself."

So very time we take the bread broken, and the blood spilled we remember in a solemn but joyful way the cost of this new covenant as well as the freedom it brings. Freedom to be forgiven, cleansed, healed and restored. Freedom to call the Living God our Heavenly Father. Freedom to follow Christ, sometimes with a spring in our step other time by the cross we carry, Freedom to be filled, led and transformed by the Holy Spirit. How wonderful to be under the new and everlasting covenant, signed and sealed by the blood of Christ. Let's Pray...