

"Ancient Paths"

Jeremiah 6:9-21

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Introduction:

With the summer Olympics coming up in less than a hundred days now, we are starting to hear news stories about athletes who are training 10 or 12 hours a day as they prepare themselves for the upcoming competition. We certainly understand that only a few of these athletes will ever actually make it to the summer games, because certain standards have been set, and if they do not meet those standards, then they are not allowed to compete.

For just a moment, I would like for us to imagine that we as a nation suddenly decide on our own that we will lower those standards and that anyone, regardless of natural talent or ability or training, will be allowed to represent the United States at the summer Olympics—that anyone who wants to compete in the Olympics can do so. I would suggest that lowering the standards would lead to confusion and would ultimately harm the games themselves. We can hardly imagine thousands of out-of-shape runners all competing in a single race. It would not be a pretty picture. The minimum standards are there for a reason.

But for just a moment, we also need to consider the effect that lowering the standards would have on the Lord's church. We understand that there are certain things that God has commanded us to do. There are certain things that God has commanded us to believe. There are certain examples that God has asked us to follow. We can look all around us, though, and we see that people are reaching into the law of God, and they are changing the message—they are lowering the standards.

As we consider the modern practice of lowering God's standards, I would like for us to go back and look once again at a message from an Old Testament prophet by the name of Jeremiah. Over the past two Lord's days, we have discovered that Jeremiah was one of the most courageous prophets. We know that Jeremiah was called by God at the age of roughly 14-15, he ultimately accepted God's call, and he prophesied for several decades leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 586 BC. Jeremiah was intensely patriotic, and yet he also knew that God's judgment was right around the corner, and so he warned the people about the danger of lowering God's standards.

Last week, I mentioned briefly that Jeremiah is sometimes known as the "weeping prophet." That reference goes back to Jeremiah 9:1, where he said, "**Oh that my**

head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people." Jeremiah, therefore, could see what was coming, and he knew what would happen if the people refused to turn their lives back toward God. The chances of turning back to God, however, were very slim. As he said in **Jeremiah 5:31**, **"The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?"** Over and over, then, in response to their stubborn rebellion, Jeremiah kept on telling the people that they needed to turn back to the **"ancient paths."** And so, this morning, I would like for us to consider the plea of Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 6**. **»PPT»** You might want to be turning with me to **Jeremiah 6** (on page 1189 in the pew Bibles), because the prophet describes the nation's rebellion in several steps and gives some compelling evidence that they had lowered God's standards. We will be looking this morning at **Jeremiah 6:9-21**...

⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts, "They will thoroughly glean as the vine the remnant of Israel; Pass your hand again like a grape gatherer Over the branches." ¹⁰ To whom shall I speak and give warning That they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed And they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; They have no delight in it. ¹¹ But I am full of the wrath of the LORD; I am weary with holding it in. "Pour it out on the children in the street And on the gathering of young men together; For both husband and wife shall be taken, The aged and the very old. ¹² "Their houses shall be turned over to others, Their fields and their wives together; For I will stretch out My hand Against the inhabitants of the land," declares the LORD. ¹³ "For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, Everyone is greedy for gain, And from the prophet even to the priest Everyone deals falsely. ¹⁴ "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace. ¹⁵ "Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done? They were not even ashamed at all; They did not even know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; At the time that I punish them, They shall be cast down," says the LORD. ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.' ¹⁷ "And I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But they said, 'We will not listen.' ¹⁸ "Therefore hear, O nations, And know, O congregation, what is among them. ¹⁹ "Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people, The fruit of their plans, Because they have not listened to My words, And as for My law, they have rejected it also. ²⁰ "For what purpose does frankincense come to Me from Sheba And the sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable And your sacrifices are not pleasing to Me." ²¹ Therefore, thus says the LORD, "Behold, I am laying stumbling blocks before this people.

***And they will stumble against them, Fathers and sons together;
Neighbor and friend will perish."***

As we look back over this passage of Scripture, we find that the nation is headed for destruction, and again, we find that Jeremiah presents several steps in their rebellion against God. He gives the evidence that they had lowered God's standards. **»PPT»** I would like for us to consider this evidence as we remind ourselves that leaving God is still possible, and is a real danger, even today.

I. One of the first things we notice is that THE PEOPLE REFUSED TO LISTEN TO THE WORD OF GOD. **»PPT» We see this in verse 10 and also in verse 19.**

In verse 10, the prophet says, ***"To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed and they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; they have no delight in it."*** In other words, Jeremiah was trying to give a message from the Lord, but the people stubbornly refused to listen. We can perhaps picture our children as we tell them to do something and they plug their ears and start chanting, "I can't hear you!" In a similar way, the people of Judah did not want to hear what the Lord had to say. Jeremiah was preaching the word of God, but the people would have nothing to do with it—they were not interested in hearing what Jeremiah had to say. And again in verse 19, Jeremiah emphasizes that the coming destruction is directly tied to their rejection of God's word, ***"Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their plans, because they have not listened to My words, and as for My law, they have rejected it also."***

With reference to the Old Covenant, Jeremiah was warning that one of the first steps into apostasy is a refusal to listen to the word of God. Two chapters later, he would say in Jeremiah 8:9, ***"The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD, and what kind of wisdom do they have?"*** And the answer is: They do not have wisdom! They may appear to be wise, they may be highly educated, they may use big words, but ***"...they are dismayed and caught."*** As we might say today, they had been "busted." They were in trouble with God. And yet even with Jeremiah's preaching, they rejected God's correction. Notice what is written over in Jeremiah 7:28, ***"You shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God or accept correction; truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth.'"*** They had not accepted correction. They had stubbornly turned away from the evidence in the word of God.

We remember that Jesus repeated this same basic accusation against His own generation in Matthew 13:15, as He quoted from the prophet Isaiah, ***"FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM."***

In the next few verses, Jesus talks directly to the disciples, He draws a contrast, and He says, ***"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it"*** (Matthew 13:16-17). Jesus was referring to the New Covenant, those words that He spoke during His earthly ministry. The apostles then went out and preached that gospel to the entire world. It is the same message that we continue to preach even today. It is very important, therefore, that we are careful to listen to the word of God, because if we reject it, it is one of the first steps down the road to apostasy.

II. As we move along to Jeremiah 6:13, we also find that THE NATION HAD BECOME OBSESSED WITH MATERIAL THINGS. »PPT» THEY WERE GUILTY OF THE SIN OF GREED.

In verse 13, Jeremiah said, ***"For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain."*** A hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had said something very similar in Isaiah 56:11, as he condemned the people, ***"They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough."*** Many years ago, we had a beagle that we had adopted from the Humane Society, and what shocked us was how much food that dog could eat. Whenever this dog moved, she moved at high speed, and she ate the same way. One time we accidentally dropped a 50 pound bag of dog food. The food went all over the floor, and we wondered: How much will she eat? We watched her for a few minutes, and she was not stopping! We had to physically pull her away from the pile of food! She would have eaten herself sick. Jeremiah was referring to the same kind of greed in verse 13.

When people are constantly obsessed with getting more and more, they start to justify their sinful behavior. They will do whatever it takes to fulfill their evil desires. And once again in the New Testament, greed continues to be linked to false teaching. People will twist the Scriptures to get their desired outcome. As Paul said in Romans 16:17-18, ***"Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."*** So at least in the church in Rome, the sin of greed helped to motivate those who were promoting false doctrine. Again, this is further evidence of spiritual rebellion.

III. All of this is very closely related to the next evidence of apostasy, and that is, THE PEOPLE HAD DELUDED THEMSELVES WITH FALSEHOODS. We see this in the second part of verse 13 as well as in verse 14. »PPT»

As Jeremiah says, ***"And from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely. They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying,***

'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace." And so we find that when people are walking on the wrong path, Satan makes it very easy for them to believe that everything is okay. But saying that someone is okay does not make them okay with God! This was God's message through Jeremiah, and it is God's message to the church today. In **2 Timothy 4:3**, Paul warned about those who want to have their **"ears tickled"** who will **"accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires."** And so instead of changing the way they believe, they go looking for someone who will proclaim them to be okay in the eyes of God. And yet if a man has cancer, telling him that he has heartburn will not solve the problem. A declaration of **"Peace, Peace,"** does not make it so.

Certainly we realize that we are living in a land of tolerance, and so there is a special temptation for us here in Madison. We have a very active gay rights community here in town. As Christians, we can treat members of that community with love and respect. But as we know, that is not enough—that is not what they are looking for. They are looking for acceptance. They want us to endorse their behavior. They want us to proclaim that they are "okay." Peace, peace...but there is no peace!

As you might remember from last week, I told you that I had been planning this series of lessons from Jeremiah for more than a year now—actually a little closer to two years. And earlier this week as I opened up my folder on **Jeremiah 6**, I found an interesting statement in an article written on this passage by a member of the Lord's church. This is what he said (written back in February 1983—think about what you were doing back in 1983—what you were doing, what you were wearing)—this is what he said, **"God's people were in sin and guilt. They wanted the guilt feeling removed without repenting of their sins. They desired that the prophets and the priests speak soothing words of comfort to ease their troubled hearts. They did not desire the uncomfortable major surgery which their sin actually required. They wanted to minimize the seriousness of their condition and desired a spiritual medication which would go down easy."** Those words were written more than 25 years ago, but even today people continue to want the feeling of guilt removed without repenting of their sins. It was true 600 years before Christ, it was true in the days of the New Testament, and it continues to be true even today.

The people had deceived themselves into thinking that they were okay in the eyes of God.

IV. As we look back to Jeremiah 6, we also find another symptom of apostasy as we see that THE PEOPLE WERE NO LONGER ASHAMED OF SIN. Or, as Jeremiah puts it in verse 15, "*They did not even know how to blush.*" **»PPT»**

Mark Twain once said, **"Man is the only creature God created that can blush, and he is the only creature that needs to."** Those are some very wise words! We remember what happened in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned for

the very first time. The Bible tells us in **Genesis 3** that they tried to hide from God. They were ashamed of what they had done. They were embarrassed.

Unfortunately, people do not seem to get embarrassed very much any more. Even in the ancient city of Corinth, the church had accepted a man who was living in sexual sin with his own stepmother. How can that happen? I know how it can happen—churches continue to accept people living in adultery, even today! And so apparently, the Christians in Corinth were bragging about it, because Paul had to confront them in **1 Corinthians 5:2**, ***"You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst."*** Paul could hardly believe that they were accepting such bizarre behavior, but they were. They were not ashamed of what was going on. They had lost their ability to blush.

Just yesterday, I noticed a story on Fox News about colleges around the nation that are now offering co-ed dorm rooms. I remember spending a week at the University of Illinois back when I was in high school, and the dorm we were in was co-ed, the bathrooms were shared, the showers at least had individual stalls. But the story in yesterday's news was about gender not really being a factor anymore when picking a roommate. Jeremiah might tell us that we as a society have lost our ability to blush.

V. But before we close our thoughts on this passage, we should also notice that THE PEOPLE WERE IN THE PROCESS OF REJECTING THE ONLY POSSIBLE CURE. »PPT»

As Jeremiah said in **verse 16**, ***"Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls.' But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"*** Jeremiah presented the people with a very clear choice. They could freely go in one of several very different directions, but they had rejected the ***"ancient paths."***

When Jeremiah referred to the ***"ancient paths,"*** the people would have understood what he was talking about. Jeremiah was referring back to the glory days of Israel—to a time before the nation had divided. We remember King Saul, King David, and King Solomon. The kingdom was strong and united, they were all working together, and yet when King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam foolishly listened to the advice of his peers, and the kingdom divided—Rehoboam in the south and Jeroboam in the north. Since Jeroboam was in the north and was now separated from Jerusalem, the Bible tells us that he set up golden calves to make their worship more convenient. Now they no longer had to travel all the way down to Jerusalem to worship. Those two calves were set up—one in Bethel and one in Dan. At this point, the entire northern kingdom of Israel turned away from God.

There is a wise saying: When you choose a path, choose it carefully, because eventually you come to the end of it. The people of God started on that path when they set up calves in Bethel and Dan, and now they were coming to the end of it. But even here at the end, the choice was still available. They could take the well-worn

path to Bethel and Dan, or they could take the ancient path—the path that led back to Jerusalem—back to those glory days before the kingdom was divided.

Conclusion & Invitation:

In a similar way today, we are calling people back to the ancient paths. We remember the warning that Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus in **Revelation 2:4-5**. After giving several compliments, Jesus said, ***"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent."*** The solution for the church in Ephesus was that they were to repent. That is, they were to remember and do the deeds they did at first. They did not need some prophet to come along and say, "You are okay!" But they were to turn back to the ancient paths.

The message is the same for all of us here this morning. If we have turned aside from what we need to be doing, the roadmap is telling us to get back on the ancient paths. We need to make an adjustment.

On the other hand, if you have never been a Christian, the Bible still tells us to look for the ancient paths. As Jesus said in **John 14:6**, ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."*** We come to Jesus by turning away from sin, by affirming that He is the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. Baptism represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song together. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org