

INI

Jeremiah 9,23-24

Septuagesima — 1 February 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We will again read the Old Testament lesson from the Book of Jeremiah the Prophet, which was read earlier:

Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Who would not like to be smarter? In addition to this, who would not like to be richer and more powerful? After all, being wiser and richer and more powerful usually means better health – the rich can afford better nutrition and medical care – and it usually means that if one was not blessed with great looks, then at least the plastic surgeon is affordable. Many strive after wisdom, power, and riches. This was true in the days of Jeremiah, who lived 600 years before Jesus’ birth, and it is true today.

But Jeremiah, as well as the rest of Scripture, shows us that if we only seek wisdom, power, and riches as ends in themselves, then the

final result is not quite what most people have in mind. At the end of his life, king Solomon put the quest for these into an eternal perspective. He wrote:

I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the battle not to the warrior, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. (Ecclesiastes 9,11).

This morning, Jeremiah shows us that if the quest for wisdom, power and riches are ends in themselves, then the only taste in our mouths at the end of life may be figurative and perhaps literal ashes.

But there is an alternative, and the alternative is not a quest for stupidity, helplessness, or poverty. The alternative is focused on gaining knowledge and understanding of the Lord. The Lord reveals Himself to us in lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness. He has revealed this to us through His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And as those called to be Christ's, we are then called to reflect lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness to others.

This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**Something Worth Boasting About.**” I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Worthless Boasting**
- 2) Worthwhile Boasting**; and,
- 3) Boasting And Doing**

1) Worthless Boasting. Jeremiah was speaking to God's Old Testament people, the people with whom He had promised: “And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God” (Exodus 6,7).

God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt into a land flowing

with milk and honey, and there they had prospered. But in their prosperity there was always a temptation. The temptation was clearly spelled out by God before the people entered the land. God told them:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments ... lest when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and have lived in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ... Otherwise you may say in your heart: 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers... (Deuteronomy 8,10-14+17-18)

God's people had been blessed with material prosperity. They had prospered. But the temptation was to look to themselves as the source and reason for their prosperity.

While God had given His people wisdom when He revealed Himself to them, God's Word of judgment showed what happened when His people forsook Him:

For My people are foolish [fools],
They know Me not;
They are stupid children,
And they have no understanding.
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know. (Jeremiah 4,22).

For God's people the greatest danger and temptation came when they were fat and happy, so to speak – that is, when they were surrounded by fine homes, great wealth, power, and wisdom. These were gifts of God, blessings to His people. Why did God bless His people? Jeremiah tells us:

And you will swear, 'As the LORD lives,'
In truth, in justice, and in righteousness;
Then the nations will bless themselves in Him, and in Him will
they glory. (Jeremiah 4,2)

It is the same reason that so many years before God chose Abraham. God told Abraham: "And in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12,3). God gave His people His Word as well as material blessings so that others might see Who the true God is, believe in Him, and have life.

Because ancient Israel was both church and state, when God's people rebelled and fell into sin, attributing their material success to themselves and falling away from God's Word, then God came in judgment. Thus, immediately before our text we hear God's final word of judgment:

Thus declares the LORD, "The corpses of men will fall like dung
on the open field,
And the sheaf after the reaper,
But no one will gather them." (Jeremiah 9,22)

This is the final indignity, that is, to die and lie rotting in the open instead of having a proper burial. It is the taste of death and of ashes in the mouth of those slain because of pride and unbelief.

But through the prophet, God gives the people a word of hope

before disaster will overtake them. They still have a chance to practice

2) Worthwhile Boasting. God told His people that the only boasting that they should practice is that they “know” and “understand” Him, for He is the God who “exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth” (v 24).

How can people know God, and more specifically, how can they know the God who “exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth”? God Himself says:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, O Israel;
I have called you by name; you are Mine. (Isaiah 43,1)

God reveals Himself to His people by calling to them in “lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness.” People do not have to search for God, for He has first searched for them and called them to be His. This is like the relationship between parents and children. Children do not have to doubt who their parents are, because parents have given them a name by which they are called. Sometimes we hear of stories in which parents search for a child who has gone astray, fallen into drugs or prostitution. The parents go to the mean streets in the cities to call for their child with the intent on rescuing that child from his or her own foolishness.

This search of a parent for a lost child is like the lovingkindness of the Lord. Another way to translate that word “lovingkindness” would be “steadfast love.” God’s love endures and is the product of His will – His will to redeem and to restore.

He deals in justice and righteousness. His justice means that He will punish sin, but that punishment is always tempered by His steadfast love. He does not punish to destroy, but to restore. God’s righteousness means that He comes to us because He wants to and not because we

deserve it.

In the Scriptures “to know” and “to understand” who God is always means “to hear” and “to obey” His voice, His Word. Psalm 95 states this quite clearly:

For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.
Today, if you would hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts... (Psalm 95,7-8)

600 years after Jeremiah gave us God’s words, the Apostle Paul used these words in his first letter to the Corinthians, and said, “that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Corinthians 1,31).

Paul, of course, is speaking about the climax of God’s calling and redeeming work of the Old Testament, which finds its fulfilment in the sending of God’s Son, Jesus. In speaking of this marvellous revelation, Peter says:

for once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God;
you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1
Peter 2,10)

Another way of speaking about God’s steadfast love comes from the lips of Jesus Himself:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal
life. (John 3,16)

It is only in Jesus that we see God’s steadfast and redeeming love in action. He we see a love that drove Jesus to the Cross to pay for our

sins so that in His death we might be bought back from sin, death, and the power of the devil. In His resurrection, we have been raised to newness of life and have something worthwhile to boast about.

Paul's boasting was always centered on the Cross of Christ. Again, in First Corinthians Paul writes:

For consider your call, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen then things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1,26-31)

In the wisdom of the Cross, God put to shame the wisdom of the world.

In the helplessness of the Cross, God put to shame the strong.

In the poverty of Jesus death, God put to shame the riches of the earth.

And in Jesus' crucifixion, we see the wisdom and power and richness of God's unsurpassing and incomprehensible grace and mercy, and in Jesus' resurrection we are the inheritors of wisdom and power and richness of God's unsurpassing grace and mercy.

Thus, God has called us to be His in Christ for both

3) Boasting And Doing. God's call in the Old Testament was clear.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, O Israel;
I have called you by name; you are Mine. (Isaiah 43,1)

And God goes on and says:

Every one who is called by My name,
And whom I have created for My glory. (Isaiah 43,7)

To be created for God's glory is another way of saying that we are to boast in God – not boast in ourselves, but in God! Paul says the same thing in Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2,8-10)

Why have we been saved? Because God is “rich in mercy,” mercy which is but a reflection of His “great love” to us shown in Christ (Ephesians 2,4). For what purpose have we been saved? We have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” This is nothing less than what God told the Old Testament prophets to tell His people. Micah said:

He [that is, God] has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6,8).

In both the Old and the New Testament, good works are always

come after God's gracious call. This is always the response to having been called and forgiven for Jesus' sake, the preludes to a new life with God.

The things by which we can boast before God is to reflect His steadfast love, justice and righteousness as we deal with others. These are the qualities by which He has first come to us in Christ, and these are the qualities by which we are to treat others. These can never be the opportunity to let sin slip by in the name of love. These can never be the opportunity to let false doctrine slip by in the name of love. Love does not stand idly by while people destroy their eternal souls by means of sin and falling away from God's pure Word.

It is tragic that churches close because congregations shrink in size. While it is happening in North America, it is going on at a faster rate in Europe. Even around here, as I drive on 580 through San Leandro I see what obviously used to be a church and is now a coffee shop. Churches close and consolidate because of shrinking membership – and in many cases that slide began decades ago with a slide into doctrinal indifference. But often it is also the case that faithfulness to God's word results in persecution and dwindling membership.

The temptation is always to seek what the world offers on the world's terms – wisdom, power, and wealth. In the Garden, the Devil offered knowledge to Eve. In the wilderness Satan tried to tempt Jesus with power and wealth. The temptation is always to go after these things and then sugar-coat the quest with words like "love." But if one seeks these things as an end in themselves, the result is surely spiritual death a long time before physical death comes.

Conclusion: In Christ, God has called us. He has blessed us with worldly goods, and to realize the riches of our earthly blessings all we have to do is look at our tax assessments that came in the mail. But all

earthly goods are blessings with a purpose – to help us boast in God. To help us reflect the steadfast love, justice, and righteousness to others that God has first shown to us. Jesus has called us in His forgiving love so that just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1,31). Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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