

At Peace with Sin, or with God?

Trinity 8

Jeremiah 23:16-29; Acts 20:27-38; Matthew 7:15-23

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If there's one thing that God condemns through the Prophet Jeremiah, it's this: the notion that we can be at peace with the God of Israel and at the same time be at peace with the sin and wickedness in our lives. In our Old Testament reading the false prophets were going around telling people, *"It shall be well with you."* They were promising this to people who *"despise the word of the LORD"* and *"to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart."* But this is most certainly a case where we cannot have our cake and eat it too. We cannot cozy up to sin and cozy up to God. We cannot coddle the rebellions of our hearts and still sustain saving faith and a living relationship with the living God.

Prophet Jeremiah gives an antidote to this foolish dreaming of the prophets. The other prophets had lulled the people into a spiritual slumber and robbed them of their spiritual inheritance, but Jeremiah clearly wants to heal them by waking them up to God's mercies: *"Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"*

Yes, the Word of God is a fire that purges and cleanses from sin! It's a hammer that can smash and break our stone-cold, rock-hard human hearts to pieces! Nothing can stand up to that Word when it is spoken faithfully. Oh, sure, a person may rebel against it – may say, "Phooey on you God! I want nothing to do with you! I will live life my way." But that does not make God's Word one bit less effective. Its fire will still burn. Its heavy blow will still fall and smash to bits.

So, don't for one second imagine that you can possibly live in peace with sin and with God at the same time. If anyone suggests such a thing, I tell you, they are a false prophet. They are just like the prophets who lied to Israel. And Israel found out the hard way that these

preachers of *"Peace, peace, when there is no peace"* (Jer. 6:14) were only belly-servers and deceivers.

And this is not just a problem for the Old Testament people of God. The same problem runs right on through the New Testament. In today's Gospel reading we hear our Lord Jesus say, as plainly as He can, that we are to *"Beware of false prophets, who come to [us] in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."* And He tells us how to spot them: *"You will recognize them by their fruits."*

Now, some people think that means you will realize who is a false prophet by looking at how they live, say, a scandalous life. That may be very true. But I think our Lord is making a different point. The fruit of a prophet is what results from believing his teaching. What happens if you take the false prophet at his word? What fruits bud and grow in your life? If you were to listen to the false prophets of Jeremiah's day, and take to heart what they preached, you would think: "Hey, I can do whatever my wayward heart desires and trust that God will forgive me no matter what, and all will be well in the end." In other words, their teaching bore the fruit of leaving people unrepentant for their sins. It left their hearts in a state of rebellion against the Holy God of Israel. That's how you tell if you have a false prophet on your hands and in your ears!

Jesus could not be clearer, or more blunt: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."* He tells us flat out that some will say to Him on the Day of Judgment: *"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"* To them He will give the sad and tragic reply: *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."*

"Yes, lawlessness. You thought you could serve sin and rejoice in it and still enjoy my

presence. Don't you understand that I am the Destroyer of sin? Don't you get it that I came to free you from sin's shackles, not to strengthen their hold on you? I went to My Cross bearing the full load of your sin so that you could be forgiven, so that you could stand in My Father's presence. When I poured out My blood for you, I blotted out the handwriting that was against you. I became a curse for you in order to set you free from the curse of the law. I did all of this to set you free from sin's tyrannical clutches. Yes, I bought you as My own flock with My own blood, the very blood of God."

In our second reading, from Acts 20, we hear the Apostle Paul speaking in harmony with Jeremiah and our Lord Jesus. St. Paul warns the Ephesian elders – that is, pastors – to pay careful attention to themselves and to the flock that the Holy Spirit committed to their care. Paul forewarns them that, after he leaves, fierce wolves will come in among the flock. They will even arise from among their own number, speaking twisted things to draw the disciples to themselves, and thus away from the Good Shepherd. And what could be more twisted and more certain to separate them from the Shepherd than telling people: "God forgives you so that you can continue in your rebellion"?

Instead, Paul does what every good pastor must do: he commends them to God in prayer, and he commends them to the message of God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus, who is able to build them up and give them *"the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."*

So, if you have been playing with sin, enjoying its hollow, fleeting pleasures; if you've been toying with it, serving it, living in rebellion against God and His ways of life; if you've been holding a grudge, slandering, committing sexual sin, being disobedient to the authorities that God has given; if you've been a slave to food or drink; if you've been thinking that you can do whatever you want without a care for God or other people around you; if you've been thinking that you can live life on your terms, yet still cling to and enjoy the grace and forgiveness of God, then I invite you to hear God's Word of grace spoken for you today.

You cannot cling to both self-seeking sin and God-given forgiveness. In fact, our whole life as Christians should be one of constantly struggling against the sins that we enjoy far too much. It's what we call repentance and faith. Our whole life should be marked by repentance, that is, by changing our minds, our wills, and our loyalties from merely earthly things to be more attuned to the things of God. It's what Scripture calls working out our salvation with fear and trembling. It takes work, hard work, to hate our sin instead of hating God, and it takes work to love our God who conquers sin and death for us and in us. Sometimes – even quite often – we will fail in our work, and our struggle will end in defeat. But the real defeat comes when we cease to struggle against sin at all.

But here is the incredibly great news: God still wants you, still cleanses you, still nourishes you to enjoy His mercy, His grace, His presence. No matter how defiled, no matter how rebellious and sinful, no matter how deceived by false prophets, He calls you to Himself, the Crucified and Resurrected One. In the blood and water that flowed from His pierced side and through the sacred Font, He washes you from your sins and sets you free to live for Him. In the same body nailed to a tree and the same blood spilled from the Cross, He comes to you today anew at this holy Table. He who puts an end to sin and brings death to death feeds you with His forgiveness and life. He calls you to come to Him and let Him give you His forgiveness – to hear from the lips of your pastor the divine Absolution that sets you free from the chains of your sins by covering you with His perfect righteousness. He wants to unite you to Himself and pour out His good Spirit into you.

So, beware of false prophets. Beware of anyone who suggests to you that you can stay safe and sound in your sin. Beware...and flee. Flee to your Jesus, the True Prophet, who conquers the sin, who rescues you from its clutches, and who gives you life and strength to live with Him. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.