



COMMON SENSE SPIRITUALITY

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Jer 8:4-7; 10:23-25

Ninth Message

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I want to begin this morning by reading a few rather interesting true-life experiences. These came my way via the Internet:

I was signing the receipt for my credit card purchase when the clerk noticed that I had never signed my name on the back of the credit card. She informed me that she could not complete the transaction unless the card was signed. When I asked why, she explained that it was necessary to compare the signature on the credit card with the signature I just signed on the receipt. So I signed the credit card in front of her. She carefully compared that signature to the one I signed on the receipt. As luck would have it, they matched.

I live in a semi-rural area. We recently had a new neighbor call the local township administrative office to request the removal of the "Deer Crossing" sign on our road. The reason: many deer were being hit by cars and he no longer wanted them to cross there.

When my husband and I arrived at an automobile dealership to pick up our car, we were told that the keys had been accidentally locked in it. We went to the service department and found a mechanic working feverishly to unlock the driver's side door. As I watched from the passenger's side, I instinctively tried the door handle and discovered it was open. "Hey," I announced to the technician, "It's open!" "I know," answered the young man. "I already got that side."

A lot of things in life come down to plain common sense, but it is amazing how often we do things or see things that defy logic. This is particularly true of the spiritual life. We are capable of reading intelligent books and having deep theological and philosophical discussions, but when it comes to basic common sense we sometimes act as if we had come from another planet. We are educated well beyond our obedience.

We return today to chapters 8-10 of the book of Jeremiah, a passage that deals with the Israelites' absolute obsession with sin and idolatry. Wisdom (the word appears nine times in these chapters) is the key word in the text. It is contrasted with stupidity, a word that appears three times in chapter 10.

In our last study we looked at three aspects of true wisdom and common sense:

1. True wisdom recognizes the authority of God's word.
2. True wisdom does not trust in human and earthly resources. A wise man or woman does not boast in their wisdom, might or riches. A wise person boasts in the Lord.
3. True wisdom recognizes the difference between the impotence of idols and the majesty of God. Idols are powerless, but God is great. Wisdom leads us to worship.

I. True wisdom involves being aware of the health of our spiritual life, and if necessary, we course correct immediately. (Jeremiah 8:4-7)

Today we will look at some additional verses that factor into this discussion on wisdom and common sense spirituality. We will begin with the first four verses of the section, chapter 8, verses 4-7; then we will look at the closing verses in chapter 10.

**"And you shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD,
 "Do men fall and not get up again?
 Does one turn away and not repent?
 Why then has this people, Jerusalem,
 Turned away in continual apostasy?
 They hold fast to deceit,
 They refuse to return.
 I have listened and heard,
 They have spoken what is not right;
 No man repented of his wickedness,
 Saying, 'What have I done?'
 Everyone turned to his course,
 Like a horse charging into the battle.
 Even the stork in the sky
 Knows her seasons;
 And the turtledove and the swift and the thrush
 Observe the time of their migration;
 But My people do not know
 The ordinance of the LORD.' "** (Jer 8:4-7, NASB)

These verses give three striking visual images that point out how foolish and lacking in common sense we can be as far as the spiritual life is concerned.

The first image has to do with falling down and not getting up: "Do men fall and not get up again?" asks the Lord. The assumed and obvious answer is no. Can anyone imagine falling down on the ground and lying there without trying to get back up again? If a runner trips or suffers an injury, he or she will get up and try to finish the race. In the Olympics a couple of days ago, the American, Suzy Favor Hamilton, fell in the 1500 meters as she was about to win the gold medal. But she got up and finished the race, even though she was completely exhausted. Have you ever seen a 300-pound lineman get knocked down on the football field and just stay there? Anytime we fall there is something inherent in our nature that makes us want to get up, brush ourselves off and continue on. This is part of our make-up. It is common sense.

Jeremiah applies this principle to the spiritual life. The Lord asks, "Does one turn away and not repent?" Turning away is parallel to falling; repenting is parallel to getting up. We can't fall and just stay on the ground. So why would we ever think of falling down spiritually, i.e. turning away from God, and not getting up, i.e. not turning back to God? That defies reason and common sense.

The people of Judah had fallen into sin and idolatry. They had turned away from Yahweh and walked after other gods. They knew what they were doing, but they decided to just lie where they had fallen and not turn back to God. They refused to get up. The Hebrew word *shuv* is the key word in these verses. It appears five times in verses 4 and 5. It is the favorite word in the Old Testament to describe apostasy (turning away) and repentance (turning towards).

We tend to do the same thing as these Israelites did. We fall into sin and idolatry and turn away from God. We know what we have done, but we remain where we are even though wisdom, common sense spirituality, tells us to repent and get back on track. Judah is not criticized for falling but for not getting up. We will be tempted, we will fall into sin, our hearts will wander from God, but we shouldn't stay there. We must recognize what has happened, confess our sin, repent, return to God and get back in the race. God is faithful to forgive, and God's people will reach out with open arms to honest souls who need help. The tragedy comes when we are content to stay on the ground or we are too ashamed to be honest.

The second image is that of a horse charging into battle.

**"I have listened and heard,
They have spoken what is not right;
No man repented of his wickedness,
Saying, 'What have I done?'
Everyone turned to his course,
Like a horse charging into the battle."** (Jer 8:6)

Here is another powerful image. I have never ridden a horse into battle, but I can recall a couple of lessons I learned while riding horses on my uncle's ranch in western Nebraska. When I neared home after a horse ride, the horse would take off and wouldn't stop until it had reached the barn. I had to hold on for dear life. The horse would gallop through the door. It didn't care if the top of the door took my head off. One time the barn door was shut and I thought we were going to go right through it. The horse stopped on a dime, but I didn't! I also remember riding a former racehorse on a few occasions. He was easy to ride, but not when I crouched low on his back, like a jockey. When I did that he seemed to think he was in the Kentucky Derby and he would charge ahead.

This image too provides a powerful picture of how we approach sin and idolatry. The word "charging" often-times is used to refer to flooding waters or torrential rain. It is a sudden, powerful, overwhelming force that cannot be stopped. This is the only occasion in the Old Testament where this word is used to describe a charging horse. Sometimes we are like wandering sheep, but at other times we go off at a full gallop. A cavalryman riding into battle didn't just go at a trot. He rode at full speed, filled with the adrenaline and emotion of the fight. This is how we can rush into sin and idolatry, heedless to what we are doing, like a horse storming into battle. We sin in the same way that we drive our cars – the pedal to the metal, without caution, objectivity or hesitation. Like Judah, we sprint into wickedness and evil, and then ask, "What have I done?"

Common sense spirituality would have us be alert to this condition. Given free rein, we are much more likely to chase after some Baal or Asherah rather than humbling

ourselves before God. When we see ourselves consumed, charging and grabbing after something, we should recognize that something is amiss. It is time to pull up on the reins. And we have to do this aggressively. We can't just whisper "Whoa, Nellie!" and expect to rein in a runaway stallion.

As I reflect on my life I recognize many times when I failed to heed these warning signs. I didn't care what anybody said. I wanted what I wanted, and nobody, not even God, could stop me. Now I can see how foolish I was and how much this kind of response cost me. I lacked wisdom, common sense spirituality. I suspect many of us can identify with this image of a charging horse.

The third image is that of birds knowing the seasons.

**"Even the stork in the sky
Knows her seasons;
And the turtledove and the swift and the thrush
Observe the time of their migration;
But My people do not know
The ordinance of the LORD."** (Jer 8:7)

This is my favorite image of the three. In Nebraska, I recall with sentimental fondness looking up at the pre-winter, gray skies at the huge flocks of geese flying in beautiful formation, following the Missouri River Valley to the south. In that peaceful place one could hear the honking, not of cars, but of these majestic birds.

Birds somehow know instinctively when to leave for their winter habitation. Some birds actually fly south at the very time their summer homes have more insect food than at any other time of the year. The weather turns cold and the insects die after the birds leave. But young birds cannot know that this will happen. For example, a bobolink born in June has never lived where the ground is covered with snow and ice, yet it begins its flight to South America in August, the hottest month of the year in North America. Swallows leave Mission San Juan Capistrano about October 23rd every year and return every March 19th. Birds recognize when it is the time to migrate. They change their home according to the seasons. They fly to warm climates when cold weather arrives, and return when it is warm again. Their life depends on knowing when to change. If they don't recognize the season, they will die for lack of food.

Walter Bruggeman writes: "Every one of God's creatures has an ordered way to live. It is proper that a horse should boldly head into battle. It is proper that storks and other birds know when to migrate, when to come and go. They have an uncanny sense of knowing what behavior is proper and when. The poet turns to creation imagery in order to comment on the right ordering of life."¹

Jeremiah applies this image to the spiritual life. We are not as wise as the birds that recognize the seasons. They observe their time, they know when to come and when to go, but we don't. We don't know the ordinances of God in the way that birds know the laws of nature. We are not aware of changes in our spiritual climate. We don't recognize when to take action regarding our spiritual life.

Common sense dictates that there should be a right order to our life. That is why we try to balance work, play, eating, sleeping and exercising. We have seasons of great effort and seasons of rest. There are rhythms to our week,

month and year. Life has different seasons: young and old; single and married; seasons with young children, teenagers and older children; seasons of study and work; seasons of retirement and golf. If we are wise we will be attentive to these seasons and rhythms of our life.

Common sense spirituality requires that we recognize the seasons and rhythms of our spiritual life. We need a healthy balance of study, prayer, rest, and serving. We need to recognize when we are spiritually dry and take appropriate action to spend time alone with God. We need to recognize when we are getting spiritually fat and find a place where we can serve and use our gifts. We need to recognize the signs that we are trying to control our lives and the lives of others – anxiety, anger, worry – and commit ourselves once more to trusting God. Oftentimes we can predict the times when we will be spiritually weaker and more prone to fall into temptation. We need to build safeguards to protect ourselves and enlist the prayers of our brothers and sisters.

Each of these three images speaks to the same idea in a slightly different way. They have to do with being alert and attentive to where we are at the moment and where we are headed. Common sense spirituality means that we are aware of the health of our spiritual life and, if necessary, we course-correct immediately.

A young man called me a few months ago to say that he felt his marriage was over. His wife had found some pornographic material on their computer, which he got through the Internet. The three of us sat down together and talked things out. The young husband immediately began to take corrective action. He unplugged his hookup to the Internet. He confessed his sin to his brothers in his discipleship group and asked them to hold him accountable. He and his wife began to study the Scriptures together and pray. Their hearts began to open up to each other at a deeper level and they found a deeper degree of intimacy. They applied common sense spirituality to their problems.

We have a lot of common sense in many areas of life, but when it comes to our spiritual life we are fickle and unwise and we act contrary to nature. We lie down in our sin; we gallop into evil; we are oblivious to the change in seasons.

This was the problem in Judah. The people were willful and obstinate. No one among them was wise enough to explain the season, that something was wrong.

Who is the wise man that may understand this? And who is he to whom the mouth of the LORD has spoken, that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined, laid waste like a desert, so that no one passes through? And the LORD said, "Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice nor walked according to it, but have walked after the stubbornness of their heart and after the Baals, as their fathers taught them." (Jer 9:12-14)

When we see our life in ruins we should be wise enough to know that something is wrong. When we go to a memorial service, common sense tells us that we will not live forever. Common sense tells us that violent movies will have a negative effect on our children. Common sense tells us that promiscuity in our nation's capital is a measure of the moral climate in our nation. Common sense tells us that if there are holes in the ozone layer, something is wrong

with our environment. Common sense tells us that there are problems in our marriage if we are in constant tension with our spouse. Wisdom means that we attend to our spiritual life, that we take note of what is happening, and take action to repent, to pull on the reins, to change our environment.

II. True wisdom realizes that only God can direct our way (10:23-24)

These are powerful images for us to reflect on, but they raise a question: How can we do it? How do we get back up? How do we pull in the reins? How do we recognize what is happening and to take corrective action?

Jeremiah gives the answer in chapter 10.

I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself; Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O LORD, but with justice; Not with Thine anger, lest Thou bring me to nothing.
(Jer 10:23-24)

These verses are autobiographical in nature. Jeremiah is speaking for himself and for the people of Judah. He is taking God's word to heart. These lines form a fitting book-end to this section of text, 8:4-10:25, because they deal with the same issues – being alert to where we are headed and correcting the course of our spiritual life.

Common sense tells us to be alert when something is wrong and that we should take appropriate action. But common sense also tells us that we don't have what it takes to make the necessary changes. If we are wise, we recognize, like Jeremiah, that we don't have what it takes. "A man's way is not in himself." We need help. We must depend on God to direct our path, establish our ways, and plant us firmly in good soil. Jeremiah goes so far as to ask God for correction, or discipline. He knows that judgment is not a bad thing. The prophet has a lot to say about judgment, and that can give rise to a negative reaction. But judgment is a good thing if we submit to it and let God use it to bring spiritual correction, remembering that God disciplines those whom he loves.

When I was first married I was out every night, involved in various sports. Even the birth of our first child didn't deter me in the least. Then one day I was playing rugby and I separated my shoulder. The injury did not heal properly and I had to undergo surgery. A year went by before my shoulder returned to normal. I was angry at first, but then I began to realize that this "judgment" was a good thing for me. God changed the course of my life that year. He set my heart right and changed my priorities.

People who lack common sense and who are not wise don't want correction. They are proud and arrogant and unteachable. They think they can control their own lives and their own destiny. And they think they can change themselves. But this is foolishness. "Stupid" is what Jeremiah calls it.

What Jeremiah is really talking about is the new covenant: "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:5-6). Nothing from us, everything from God. We can recognize the danger, but we must look to God for his strength, provision,

guidance and direction. If we are to walk in a manner worthy of those who are called holy ones, then we must walk hand in hand, arm in arm, foot in foot with God, remembering that “A man’s way is not in himself.”

**I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go;
I will counsel you with My eye upon you.
Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding,
Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,
Otherwise they will not come near to you. (Psa 32:8-9)**

You may have heard this variation on the familiar “Footprints” story. It captures what we have been talking about.

Imagine you and the Lord Jesus are walking down the road together. For much of the way, the Lord’s footprints go along steadily, consistently, rarely varying the pace. But your footprints are a disorganized stream of zigzags, starts, stops, turnarounds, circles, departures and returns.

For much of the way, it seems to go like this, but gradually your footprints come more in line with the Lord’s, soon paralleling His consistently.

You and Jesus are walking as true friends! This seems perfect, but then an interesting thing happens: Your footprints, that once etched the sand next to Jesus’, are now walking precisely in His steps. Inside His larger footprints are your smaller ones. Safely you and Jesus are becoming one.

This goes on for many miles, but gradually you notice another change. The footprints inside the large footprints seem to grow larger. Eventually they disappear altogether. There is only one set of footprints; they have become one. This goes on for a long time, but suddenly the second set of footprints is back.

This time it seems even worse! Zigzags all over the place. Stops. Starts. Deep gashes in the sand. A veritable mess of prints. You are amazed and shocked. Your dream ends. Now you pray: “Lord, I understand the first scene with zigzags and fits. I was a new Christian; I was just learning. But you walked on through the storm and helped me learn to walk with you.”

“That is correct.”

“ ... and when the smaller footprints were inside of Yours, I was actually learning to walk in Your steps. I followed you very closely.”

“Very good. You have understood everything so far.”

“...when the smaller footprints grew and filled in Yours, I suppose that I was becoming like you in every way.”

“Precisely.”

“So, Lord, was there a regression or something? The footprints separated, and this time it was worse than at first.”

There is a pause as the Lord answers with a smile in his voice.

“You didn’t know? That was when we danced.”

If we let God direct our steps we will end up dancing.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 87.