



CLING TO THE PRECIOUS

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 Jeremiah 13:1-11
 Twelfth Message
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The World Series, that great fall classic, is upon us once again. And once more, the New York Yankees are bidding for the championship. We only wish the other team was the San Francisco Giants.

When I was a child, baseball was *the* sport of America. The New York Yankees was my team, and Mickey Mantle my hero. Every kid collected and traded baseball cards. Because I loved the Yankees and Mantle, I had a collection of Yankee baseball cards. A number of years ago, when cards really started going up in value, I called home to make sure my mother still had mine. My heart sank when she said she had thrown them all away. I had entire collections of Yankee teams from the late fifties and early sixties. I had several Mantle cards, along with Ted Williams, Stan Musial, Willie Mays and other Yankee greats. To this day I find it hard to go into a card shop, because when I look at the cards arrayed in their glass cases, all I can say is, "I had that card! I had that card! I had that card!" When I start adding up how valuable they have become, I feel sick. I'm getting depressed right now just thinking about it. My mother didn't realize how valuable they had become. Instead of holding onto them, she let them go and threw them out.

We tend to do the same with many things of value in life, especially our spiritual life. We allow what is sacred and precious to be thrown away, to be tarnished, damaged and ruined, while at the same time we hold tightly to things that are ordinary and have no long-term value.

In Jeremiah 13, the prophet acts out a story, a drama really, that points out our foolishness in this regard. They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. Our text this morning provides a wonderful picture. In fact, this would be a great drama to act out in our Sunday School classes. It captures a powerful spiritual truth.

Jeremiah 13:1-11:

Thus the LORD said to me, "Go and buy yourself a linen waistband and put it around your waist, but do not put it in water." So I bought the waistband in accordance with the word of the LORD and put it around my waist. Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, "Take the waistband that you have bought, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates and hide it there in a crevice of the rock." So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the LORD had commanded me. After many days the LORD said to me, "Arise, go to the Euphrates and take from there the waistband which I

commanded you to hide there." Then I went to the Euphrates and dug, and I took the waistband from the place where I had hidden it; and lo, the waistband was ruined, it was totally worthless.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Just so will I destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This wicked people, who refuse to listen to My words, who walk in the stubbornness of their hearts and have gone after other gods to serve them and to bow down to them, let them be just like this waistband which is totally worthless. For as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me,' declares the LORD, 'that they might be for Me a people, for renown, for praise and for glory; but they did not listen.'" (Jer 13:1-11, NASB)

In this Old Testament drama God uses an article of clothing to teach a spiritual symbol. In the Scriptures, God makes frequent use of common symbols, things like bread, water, light, cups and seeds, to point out spiritual truths. Here he uses a waistcloth, an intimate piece of apparel that clings closely to the body of the wearer and serves as a thigh-length undershirt.

There is a loose chiasmic structure to the text. The Lord issues three commands to Jeremiah, and after each command, Jeremiah acts in obedience to what he is told. Following the three commands there are three statements from God, which match the three commands, in reverse order.

First, Jeremiah is commanded to buy a waistcloth or waistband. He obeys, and puts the article of clothing around this waist.

Second, Jeremiah is commanded to go to the Euphrates and hide the waistcloth in the crevice of a rock. As the Euphrates was in Babylon, this would have meant a journey of over 500 miles one way. This very long distance could represent Judah's imminent journey into exile. However, the word possibly is referring to a city in Judah, not far from Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth (Josh 18:23 – Wadi Farah). If that were what Jeremiah is referring to, the people of Judah would have been aware of his actions. In either case, Jeremiah obeys the word of God.

Third, Jeremiah is commanded to retrieve the waistcloth. Once again he obeys, only to find that the waistband is ruined. It is totally worthless and useless and no

longer fit to accomplish its intended purpose.

The waistcloth is a spiritual symbol of Judah's relationship to God. God gives a word that matches each action in reverse order.

First, God says he will destroy the pride of Judah and Jerusalem in the same way the waistcloth was destroyed. The words "ruin" (verse 7) and "destroy" (verse 9) are the same.

Second, God points out the reason for Judah's destruction: she has refused to listen to his word. The people "walk in the stubbornness of their hearts." This is a favorite phrase of Jeremiah to describe the sin of Judah. The word "stubbornness" appears only ten times in the Old Testament, and eight of these occurrences are in Jeremiah. Judah has stubbornly bowed down to serve idols instead of being faithful to Yahweh. The people had ignored and neglected their relationship with God in the same way that Jeremiah had neglected the waistband. The people of Judah had hidden themselves from God in the same way that Jeremiah had hidden the waistcloth in the crevice of the rocks. And they had done this in a way that was marked by self-will and self-reliance.

Third, God says that his original intent for Judah was that his people cling to him in the same way that a waistband clings to a man's waist. This last statement in verse 11 matches Jeremiah's first action in verse 2. The word "cling" describes the kind of relationship that God intended his people to have with him. The term is found in Genesis 2, where Moses gives the goal for marriage: "a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave [cling] to his wife and the two shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:25). The word means to adhere, to be glued together.

God's plan, for Judah to be for him a people for renown (literally, a name), for praise and for glory, was in ruins.

The principle is quite clear. We drastically change our assessment of what is precious as opposed to what is ordinary. Our tendency is to cling to the profane and neglect the sacred. We cling to idols and not to God, with the result that our relationship with God undergoes decay and finally is good for nothing.

I am reminded of a story told by Max Lucado about two prowlers who broke into a department store:

They successfully entered into the store, stayed long enough to do what they came to do, and escaped unnoticed. What is unusual about the story is what these fellows did. They took nothing. Absolutely nothing. No merchandise was stolen. No items were removed. But what they did do was ridiculous. Instead of stealing anything, they changed the cost of everything. Price tags were swapped. Values were exchanged. These clever pranksters took the tag off a \$395.00 camera and stuck it on a \$5.00 box of stationery. The \$5.95 sticker on a paperback book was re-

moved and placed on an outboard motor. They re-priced everything in the store! ... But the craziest part of this story took place the next morning. The store opened as usual. Employees went to work. Customers began to shop. The place functioned as normal for four hours before anyone noticed what had happened.¹

The price tags that we place on things can become mismarked. The value that we place on them does not correspond to their actual worth, with the result that we pay a very high price for holding onto the wrong things.

We are the people of God. We have been called by the Father and redeemed by his Son. Our lives have been purchased. "For you have been bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:20a). Our sacred and precious relationship with God is the most important thing about us. It is a one-flesh relationship, a holy marriage. The way we cultivate oneness in this relationship is by leaving or forsaking all other idols and clinging to God. As clothing enhances a man, so we have been purchased through the blood of Christ to enhance God. God's intention is for us to be for him a people, a name, for praise and glory. We often wonder how God is going to bless us, but in the Scriptures we learn that we are created and redeemed to be a blessing for God; to be for him a name, a people to bring him honor.

Paul echoes this thought in his opening word to the Ephesians:

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph 1:5-6).

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory (Eph 1:11-14).

Idolatry ruins our relationship with God and his intentions for us as his people. When we walk in the stubbornness of our own hearts and cling to what is profane, ordinary and worthless, that which is so sacred to God and should be sacred to us becomes good for nothing. But we do this over and over again. Jeremiah's three-act drama shows us just how foolish we are.

We would never think of buying a piece of clothing, a nice suit or dress, and then hiding it in a rock. That would ruin it. We would never leave a bicycle out to rust in the rain. We would never think of leaving the windows of our car down during a rainstorm, because

the interior would be ruined. We would never consider burying our precious jewelry in the dirt. We would not neglect our home or business. Yet we neglect God and don't give our relationship with him the care that we so readily give to other things.

We cling to money and possessions and ambition. We cling to the idols that we hope will meet our needs and our wants. We even cling to good things, our spouse, our children, our job, expecting and wanting the love and acceptance and worth which they cannot possibly give to us. Just this past week my wife and I talked about what we are clinging on to. We agreed that we are holding on tightly to our children. This is a positive thing in many ways, yet it can have a negative impact also.

What are you clinging onto today? Are you clinging to God?

The symbol of the worthless waistcloth is very powerful. Are we neglecting the one thing that we should hold most dear? Have we allowed the most sacred thing to undergo decay? The exhortation of the text is to release our grip on the profane, the things that can never satisfy and fulfill, and take a firm hold of the sacred and holy. It is by clinging to God that we become for him a people, a name for his praise and glory. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "abhor what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9).

Perhaps you think your garments are too soiled, that your life is ruined. I don't want you to leave here with that thought as we conclude our studies in this book for now. Jeremiah has harsh words of judgment, yet throughout his prophecy he has words of hope, too. The prophet's mission is not only "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow," but also "to build and to plant." Throughout this text God's promise is, "If you return to me, I will return to you."

We are unworthy, but we are not worthless. Our worth is defined by God's acts of creation and redemption. God created us in his image. Christ gave his life so that we might be redeemed. God's actions demonstrate that we are very precious to him. Jesus is the answer to our problem of dirty laundry and ruined waistbands. This theme of garments and clothing runs throughout the Bible. Sin has soiled and stained us and left us in rags, but in Christ we are clothed anew.

**I will rejoice greatly in the LORD,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa 61:10)**

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Gal 3:27)

He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Rev 3:5)

This concept of new clothing is beautifully pictured in the story of the prodigal son. When the father sees the returning son, he runs to him and dresses him in his best robe. This is what happens to us when we come to Christ: we are clothed in a robe of righteousness. However, our tendency is to forget this and put on our dirty clothes again and start clinging to idols. So we must come again and again to God, reminding ourselves of who we are in Christ, covering ourselves again in our robes of righteousness, letting go of the things we have been clinging onto and clinging to the most precious thing we have, our life in God, becoming for him a people for his name, for his honor and glory.

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1. Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986) 31-32.