

Warnings, Repentance and Grace
Joel 2: 28-29; 32
Luke 18: 9-14
Preached by Dr. Cahill
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Biblical scholars differ on the exact years Joel prophesied to the Israelites, but all agree his little book is a necessary read.

God called Joel to warn the the children of Israel they faced imminent doom if they didn't change their crooked ways.

On the surface, God seems eager to pounce with double doses of divine retribution, but nothing is further from the truth. Behind God's righteous wrath were reservoirs of sorrow and despair. God's dire warnings through his prophets were always second chances so his people would finally repent and come to their senses.

So, part of the prophet's task was to give warnings. Unless the Jews repented, there'd be consequences. Unfortunately for them, the leaders of the political, business and religious establishments thought they had no reason to repent. They were fine just the way they were.

Joel took no delight in his warnings. He knew what was coming. Helpless, all he could do was faithfully channel God's angst and hope for the best.

But the worst came in the form of an invading army, not an army of men, but a thick cloud of locusts, blotting out the sun and devastating their crops and all the other vegetation.

Some biblical scholars take this holocaust of locusts literally. Those who don't take it literally believe Joel used an invasion of locusts as a metaphor. They don't know if it was the Assyrian army or the Babylonian army. Remember, there's nothing specific in Joel's writings giving any hint of the historical context of his time and place.

So why did Joel metaphorically use invading locusts as Israel's destroyers?

Here's a clue. In the Book of Exodus, Moses gave Pharaoh one warning after another, saying, "Let my people go." Every time Pharaoh ignored these warnings, God sent one plague after another. The eighth plague? A cloud of locusts.

Joel preached an image dripping with irony. The Jews' suffering would equal the Egyptians'. This was the mother of all wake up calls but sadly, like other warnings, it was ignored until it was too late.

Joel lamented,
 "What the cutting locust left,
 the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locusts left,

the hopping locust has eaten,
And what the hopping locus left,
the destroying locust has eaten...
For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable;
its teeth are lion's teeth...
Put on sackcloth and lament,
you priests;
wail, you ministers of the altar..." (Joel 1:4,6,13)

But all wasn't doom and gloom. Joel's writings end with the gospel of grace.

"Then afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all
flesh;
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams
and your young men shall see
visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out
my spirit..."

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls." (Joel 2: 28- 29; 32)

You may remember the apostle Peter quoted these latter verses on the day of Pentecost. Even though God's own people rejected the Messiah, there's still good news. Those who repent will be saved and baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Joel preached God's gospel of unmerited grace. Despite our disobedience, we are justified, even though we don't deserve it.

The question is, "What does it take to deserve it?"

Let's take a closer look at the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Its lesson is clear: God dispenses grace on those who repent and withholds it from those who take it for granted.

When I was a boy, my parents gifted me a picture book on the parables of Jesus. One picture in particular stayed with me. The Pharisee stands in the middle of the sanctuary, proudly standing tall with his arms raised to the heavens.

Meanwhile, the publican is bowed down in the shadows of a great pillar beating his breast with his hand.

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Let's get better acquainted with the Pharisee. He's quite a formidable fellow. Give him credit. He takes his religion seriously.

Listen again to his list of accomplishments:
"I fast twice a week. I give back a tenth of my income..."

How many of us can claim to do either of these things?

There's no denying it, this Pharisee was a good man. He took his religion more seriously than most. He was also a man of persistent prayer because prayer is what you do when you fast. Two days a week he took the time and made the effort to put into practice what he preached.

Even more impressive, this Pharisee was a ten percenter. He was disciplined and sacrificial in his giving to the church. Any preacher would want more members like him.

Now let's look at the publican. This guy's a total mess. He probably doesn't pray much and gives little, if anything, to the church. His life is one misadventure after the other. Topping it off, he's the local tax collector, a collaborator and opportunist who betrays his neighbors by gouging them with high fees for collecting their taxes.

Here we have two individuals at opposite ends of the spectrum, as far away from each other as a young Mormon missionary and a violent drug dealer. One's a prince, the other a thug.

And yet, Jesus saw in him something most of us can't see, that crack in his broken soul that God can slip in through.

What did Jesus see in the Pharisee? Someone with his defenses up so high God could never get through to him. The Pharisee never asked for forgiveness because he thought he was blameless. He was your stereotypical Pharisee, a proud, self-made man in complete control of his life (or so he thought.)

The tone of his prayer exposes his biggest failure.

"God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers and especially not this tax collector."

To protect his self image, the Pharisees set up the worst kind of straw men before comparing them to himself. Doing this, he was taking the easy way out. Comparing himself to the worst of the worst, he never had to confront the worst of himself.

Do you ever catch yourself doing this?

Listen to the way people sometimes talk about each other. Maybe you'll hear yourself.

“God, I don’t know what’s wrong with that woman next-door. Her life is a disgrace. She can’t hold down a job, and her kids take after her. They’re one step away from reform school. I’m glad I’m not anything like her.”

Or,

“Lord, I just can’t understand it. Why did the boss hire that guy in the first place? He’s a nobody, not even a college graduate... yet he’s doing the same job as me. He better not be getting paid the same as me.”

Like it or not, we compare ourselves to others to make ourselves look good. On the flipside, we also compare ourselves to others to make ourselves look bad.

Either way, these comparisons do nothing to help you or me grow in Christ.

The Pharisee’s fatal flaw that canceled out all his strengths was an absence of humility that diminished his humanity. All of his achievements weren’t made to give God the glory, but to accentuate the cleverness of himself.

Corrie Ten Boom was a brave woman who hid Jews in her attic during the Nazi occupation of Holland. She survived the concentration camps and later became a prolific writer and lecturer, admired around the world.

She was once asked if all of her success and fame made it difficult to remain humble. She answered with a sense of humor.

“When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey and everybody was waving palm branches and singing praises, do you think for one minute it entered the head of that donkey that any of it was for him?”

The Pharisee took his religion seriously but he didn’t take God seriously. On the contrary, he took God for granted. His prayer was actually a laundry list of his accomplishments. How could this man ever repent and accept God’s grace if he believed he was practically perfect in every way?

I once attended a seminar on public speaking. The teacher of the course wanted his students to sound authentic, using our natural voices and trying not to sound like slick infomercial voiceover announcers.

There was one student in the class who thought he knew better than the teacher. When it was his turn to stand up and give his talk, he sounded just like one of those slick infomercial voiceover announcers.

When the teacher tried to get this guy to tone it down a bit, he became oppositional and left the class. Apparently, he didn’t need any outside help.

Deep down, the Pharisee didn’t think he needed outside help. To believe that, he must’ve been on an unusually long winning streak. Maybe for too long, everything was going his way.

If you or I ever start thinking this way, for our own sakes, I hope God ends our winning streak before we ruin ourselves. Otherwise, grace can never happen.

“God be merciful to me, a sinner,” pleaded the tax collector. Standing in the shadows, away from everybody, feeling out of place and out-of-control, he couldn’t even look up to show his face. He was ready to confront himself in the presence of God. That’s why the tax collector went home justified. He had nothing to offer God except his sin sick soul.

Jesus taught, “I did not come for people who think they are well. I came for people who know they are sick.” (Mark 2:17)

At our best, we’d admit we’re a curious combination of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Very rarely is someone exclusively one or the other. That explains the internal struggle waging with us between the real self and the false self.

The apostle Paul wrote about our real self and our false self. Your real self is who you are becoming by the grace of God. Your false self is who you have become without God. Your real self is the best part of you or, Christ living in you. That’s the part of you accepting outside help if only because you’ve come to know you need it.

The next time you catch yourself comparing yourself to someone else, stop doing it. Instead, compare yourself to Jesus, the only true measure the quality of your soul.

Of course, you’ll never measure up to Jesus, but that’s the point. Like the publican who repented, you can experience the gift of unmerited grace.

Believe it or not, today I’m preaching the first of three stewardship sermons. What does stewardship mean?

In Jesus’ day, a steward was given the job of managing or taking care of someone else’s property.

Today’s message is this: as a child of God, you belong to God, so take good care of yourself. Don’t be like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. Instead, be like the tax collector. Come clean with yourself. Come clean with God. If you’re not finding happiness when you look in all the wrong places, repent, turn around, and find true your joy in Christ.

Being “in Christ” simply means you’re finally free to love yourself enough to embrace your new identity, as a child of God. Now you don’t have to pretend you’re someone you’re not. You can love yourself, just as you are because God loves you just as you are.

This knowledge is the beginning of your reclamation. In other words, God reclaims you for Himself.

This reclamation is also the beginning of your stewardship of everything and everyone belonging to God. Being in Christ, you are free to let the light of Christ shine through you by

being a healing presence, a pillar of strength, the salt of the earth and an advocate of Christ's peace and justice.

Joel's prophecies, like Jesus parables are warnings or better still, wake up calls. When you take these warnings seriously, when you wake up and repent, you experience God's amazing grace.

As members of Christ's beloved community, let's promise God and each other to help each other grow into God's grace so together, we can move forward as the people of God.

During the next couple of weeks, you will be asked to explore what God is requiring of you as a steward of everything God has given over to your care. Be in prayer about these things. Ask God to show you how to be generous, not just with your hard earned incomes, but equally important, being generous with your time and energy.

The prophet Joel proclaimed,
"Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all
flesh;
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see
visions.
Even on male and female
slaves,
in those days, I will pour out
my spirit. (Joel 2; 28-29)

Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18: 14)

Like a loving mother and father, God warns us for our own good when we chose the wrong way. Like wise, when we turn away from our old selves to be embraced by the new, we are justified in God's eyes. Now we are free to live under God's grace. Now we are free to know the joy of giving God our best because God gave his best to us.