

July 29, 2012  
Pentecost 9

*"Veneer Christianity or True Repentance"*

### **JEREMIAH 7:1-14**

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**T***his is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message: "Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. <sup>3</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. <sup>9</sup> "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"--safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. <sup>12</sup> "Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. <sup>13</sup> While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. <sup>15</sup> I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim."*

She was ready to buy her first car. Every day she looked at Craigslist under used cars. There it was! The car of her dreams, an older car with low miles, a white Volkswagen Jetta with black leather seats, shiny on the outside, shiny on the inside and even the motor looked clean. She took it for a test drive and was ready to buy it on the spot. Then her dad said, "Let's take it to a mechanic." The mechanic took it for drive, put it on his hoist, checked it out with a flash light and even checked the cylinders for a compression check. He found problems with the transmission, the engine, the steering and brakes. Repairs would be several thousand dollars. What looks good on the outside may not always be true of the inside.

So it was with God's people who came to worship in the temple at the time of Jeremiah the prophet. They looked good on the outside but on the inside they were rotten to the core. They joined in singing "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." But even as they sang they were already planning in their minds how they would go up to the high places around Jerusalem and worship Baal with sonorous tones, "O Baal, hear us! Oh Baal, hear us!

What the prophet Jeremiah saw in the people of Jerusalem we still see in people today. They come to worship appearing on the outside to be so religious and so faithful and so

loyal to the Lord as they greet each other and join in singing God's praise. What goes on inside during the week is so in conflict with who they are on Sunday morning. Today we want to speak about "Veneer Christianity or True Repentance." All of us need the Lord's help to not just look good on the outside but also have true repentance on the inside.

## **Veneer Christianity**

Satan would love to have you and me look good on the outside but then be rotten and corrupt on the inside. I am holding a piece of board in my hand that has a beautiful veneer wood put over a rather ugly pieces of plywood similar to this piece of OSB or particle board. The people coming to the temple to worship looked good on the outside but the Lord could see how corrupt and sinful they were on the inside. He sent the prophet Jeremiah to greet the people as they came to worship and call them to repentance.

Here is the message he delivered to multiple groups of people as they came to the temple with their outward show of loyalty and faithfulness to the Lord. "Reform your ways and your actions and I will let you live in this place." The word for "reform" has the thought of doing what is good and right and pleasing not for people but for the Lord. He told them not to trust in deceptive words and say: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." The people lived under the huge deception and lie that that they could proclaim God's praises in the temple in the morning and worship Baal in the evening. Later in this chapter the Lord says, "Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather the wood, the fathers light the fire and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven." There is nothing wrong with making cookies and cupcakes and delightful bread cakes, but to make them to offer to Ashtoreth the Queen of Heaven and her consort and son Baal was truly an abomination to the Lord.

The Lord wanted his people to take an honest look at their lives and realize how much they deserved to be cast off forever. He told them about the injustices that were taking place in the land. They were oppressing the alien and the orphans and the widows, shedding innocent blood and following foreign gods. The Lord asks them, "Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and perjury and burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known and then come before me in this house which bears my name and say, 'We are safe' safe to do all these detestable things." Under the thin veneer of worshiping in God's temple, they were tolerating every sin imaginable, even sacrificing their children in the fire to their pagan gods.

When the people went up to the temple of the Lord they smelled the sacrifices burning just as we smell the Santa Maria Style BBQ that is so popular in our area. Every animal sacrifice in the temple of the Lord pointed to the great sacrifice Jesus would give for us as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. When they walked their streets at night they smelled the incense that people burned to the prophet Baal. They lived in both worlds, pretending to love the Lord just as they loved their god Baal. They brought their grain offerings to the Lord and they also used their grain to make their bread cakes to the Queen of Heaven. With their voices they sang the great psalm that begins with the words, "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his mercy endures forever." With even greater fervor and full throated zeal they joined their false prophets in praying, "O Baal hear us."

Our Lord Jesus faced something similar in the Pharisees who tried to sugar coat the bad they did with multiple trips to the temple of the Lord and long prayers. "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self indulgence." He described them as white-washed tombs, white on the outside but with a decaying corpse on the inside. He condemned them for stealing a widow's house from her and then making up for it by going to the temple and saying long prayers. It is ingrained in our sinful nature to think that we can cure what is wrong inside with a sugar coating or veneer of goodness that impresses other people but is an abomination to our God.

Why have we come to this worship service today? Do we sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty" to impress our God and cover our sins of the past week? No, we come to worship because we want our God to serve us and use his power as God to lead us to genuine repentance.

### **True repentance**

The Lord wanted his people to hear the truth when they came to the temple. He set his prophet Jeremiah at the entrance and told him to proclaim a message the people did not want to hear. The Lord told his people, "I have been watching." We cannot hide our sin from the Lord, even though we foolishly think we are getting away with something if no one sees what we are doing. In Psalm 139 we confess, "O Lord you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down you are familiar with all my ways." The Lord sees behind the veneer, the smoke and mirrors, the sugar coating. The Lord sees how totally impossible it is for us to produce any righteousness that can outweigh the evil we have done. That is why he sent Jesus to be our righteousness and shed his blood to declare us clean. Jesus tells us in John 15, "You are clean through the Word I have spoken to you."

The Lord had to warn his people of the consequences for their pitiful veneer that was trying to cover their idolatry. In love he had to warn them just as he warned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah through righteous Lot and the people at the time of the flood through Noah. Through the mouth of his prophet Jeremiah he tells the people to go to Shiloh where the tabernacle once stood. "Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel."

For generations people gathered in Shiloh to worship in the tabernacle before the temple was built in Jerusalem. Now Shiloh was nothing. Have you ever seen pictures of Detroit the once great motor city of our nation? Shiloh was nothing. The same would happen to the city of Jerusalem if the people did not repent of their idolatry and get rid of this smoke and mirrors game with their God. "Therefore, I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers."

Let me read to you what happened to Jerusalem and the temple towards the end of the life of Jeremiah the prophet. The last chapter of Jeremiah describes how the commander of the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem. "He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The

whole Babylonian army under the command of the imperial guard broke down all the walls around Jerusalem." The warnings of the Lord through his prophet Jeremiah came true.

The Lord warns us here in his Word that he is coming to judge this world and destroy it by fire. 2 Peter 3 warns us, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." Then it goes on to say, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?"

What kind of people ought you to be? We certainly don't want to be like these people at the time of Jeremiah who tried to put a nice veneer over the evil they were doing. 2 Peter 3 says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The Lord was so patient with his people at the time of Jeremiah. There were times when Jeremiah lost his patience and wanted to die. He became so tired and weary of calling people to repentance.

The Lord never grows tired of working with people like you and me. He leads us to confess our sin before him. He assures us of his forgiveness. Psalm 103 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." He leads us to true repentance that takes us away from trusting in some thin veneer of self righteousness, and places all our hope in Jesus and his righteousness. That's the power of God's amazing grace. Amen.