

Jeremiah 4:3: Break Up the Fallow Ground of Your Hearts

OUTLINE

A proper sight of sin
A proper response to sin

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to preach a sermon to you that I am preaching to my own heart as well. From time to time it is important for us to revisit the sinfulness of our sins, because we lose sensitivity to sin, we become hardened to sin. If you will allow me to put it this way I believe that our generation runs the highest risk of being hardened towards sin. Never has atheism been as acceptable if not respectable as it is today; never has religion been so despised; never has permissiveness been so fashionable instead of shameful; never has sin been so excused as cultural, as temperament, as a dopamine disorder, or a brain structure thing, or justified because of trauma, or nurture; never has sin been so normalized as we have been assaulted through our eyes and our ears; never has sin been so institutionalized and socially acceptable; never has holiness, purity, and self-control been seen as so repressive, harmful and a sign of being stunted in our personal development. With so many lies minimizing the seriousness of sin the holiness of God is no longer glorious and something to be worshipped, but a basic error that needs to be compensated for. A God of justice who judges sin is an embarrassment. Jesus Christ as a Savior from sin is nonsensical. Our own hearts betray us they live in doubt of God and a restless desire for sin. Today I want to offer the biblical perspective on sin so that we can speak back to these lies and break up the hard grounds of our hearts towards sin. I want to bring us an exhortation in the spirit of Hebrews 3:13, 'But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' The deceitfulness of sin is its ability to harden us to the truth of God and the seriousness of sin.

The text that will be helping us today comes from Jeremiah 2:1-4:5. I am calling this sermon, breaking up the fallow ground of our hearts, a phrase taken from Jeremiah 4:3, 'Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.' A phrase that is repeated in Hosea 10:12. Imagine a field that is hard from disuse. The soil is unbroken, it is hard baked under a desert sun, there are all sorts of weeds and thorns that have taken root in the unused ground as it has been left and now it needs a plough before it can take seed and be fruitful. To cast seed before the ground has been prepared will result in seeds not taking or being choked by thorns. When God calls His people to repent from their sins; but to repent from the heart He uses this picture. Jeremiah is writing during the reign of Josiah. You will remember that he was the boy king who rediscovered the law while cleaning the temple and rededicated the nation back to God reviving the worship of God that had fallen into neglect. But, although there was an outward upturn in religion, the people of God had not truly turned from their idols in their hearts. It was a shallow work of repentance. God has recently acted to discipline His people for their sins, they have received no spring rain according to the curses of the law of Moses, 3:3, but still they are hard to their sins. God sends the prophet Jeremiah to address this people who sin with impunity, who feel no guilt, who justify their behavior. What we are seeing here is what God would say to a hardened heart that has lost its sensitivity to sin to wake it up and make us aware of the seriousness of sin and the true nature of repentance. We

will look through these chapters under two headings, a proper sight of sin; and a proper response to sin.

A proper sight of sin

What is the most heartache that you think you could experience? As we look at the full spectrum of human experience there are certain situations which we know would be almost unbearable to take. It is these situations that God compares our sin against Him to try and wake us up from our stupor. God draws on two heartbreaking scenarios. The first is the plight of a betrayed spouse. 2:1-2 begin with the reflections of a husband thinking back to the early days, the honeymoon stage of the relationship, 'Thus says the Lord, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.'" God tells a story we are emotionally involved in as we immediately resonate with the early heady days of our love. And then the hard realities of our sin against the God we once treasured is set forth, 3:1-5, 'If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the Lord. Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed. Have you not just now called to me, 'My father, you are the friend of my youth—will he be angry forever, will he be indignant to the end?' Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.'" I know of a man, a Christian, a faithful husband and father, whose wife began to cheat on him. She would doll herself up and go out saying that she was with friends, but it turns out that she was on Tinder and other dating apps making herself available for hook ups, one night stands. Over 20 years of marriage and having raised adult daughters, the pain in his eyes as he told me his story, can you imagine how you would feel if that was you? God is trying to get our attention to tell us that this is what sin is really like.

But we are hard hearted so God gives us another picture, another heartbreak that would destroy any of us. Imagine as a parent, loving and providing for your child, think of the daily choices of sacrifice and inconvenience as you parent them, only to see your child decide that they don't want you as their parent and they go to another's home, to eat another's cooking, and basically disown you. Imagine this in an honor culture like the ancient Near East. In 3:14 God calls to His people, 'Return, O faithless children.' Now we must be clear, God is impassible, He is not subject to emotional weakness and being overwrought. The Bible speaks in this way not to indicate that we have emotional ammunition against God and that He is living in a constant state of emotional betrayal because of our perpetual sin. No, He is drawing on our strongest sensibilities, the strongest bonds of loyalty that we know and showing us through these how terrible our sins really are. In truth the analogy of sin as emotional betrayal is always less than the reality of the seriousness of our sin against God. Human experience cannot exhaust the seriousness of sin against an infinite God. You should approach these painful scenarios where these duty laden relationships are treated as dirt and despised; then say to yourself, my sins against such a God are worse than that.

Sin as an act against God is what makes up the definition of sin. Some of the most important words of repentance and recognition of the seriousness of sin are those of David when he repents of his adultery and murder in Psalm 51:4, 'Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.'

Culture's definition of sin is something you do against others, against the good of society, or against yourselves. The Bible recognizes that part of the wrong in our sin is the wrong that it does to others or ourselves. But the first part, the most serious part of all sin is that it is against God. God highlights the nature of our sin in several ways in these chapters.

Here are a few of the highlights. 2:5, 'Thus says the Lord: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" Sin finds fault with God, which of course is the farthest thing from the truth. God can do no wrong, but sin paints God in the wrong so that we can do what we want. God is all good and cannot sin but we will ascribe wrong to Him over and over again. Even in the Garden of Eden God was portrayed as a miser for denying Adam and Eve access to one tree when they had the right to all the others; and as insecure worried that they might become like Him knowing good and evil; and unreasonable for making harsh rules that He never made about even touching the tree. We are so self-deceiving that we can make the one who cannot sin guilty of sin. If we can paint God as the villain and ourselves as the victim we can justify our sins to ourselves.

We see that the nature of sin is to go far from God, or as Isaiah puts it, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.' The picture here is more pointed as it is describing a wife who is in covenant marriage straying from her husband. The one that loves her, and the one she once loved; the one she has obligations to is the one she has abandoned. God gives us a theological insight into sin, He calls it 'worthlessness.' This is how the Bible describes the empty idols that Israel often preferred to God but it describes well anything that we put in the place of God. Compared to God all is worthless, sin makes treasure out of those things that have no eternal value. Someone has said that sin is giving finite things infinite worth.

God then describes a painful side effect of pursuing sin, 'and went after worthlessness and became worthless.' We become like what we worship, in this case worthless. We become useless to God, our neighbor, our families, our employers, our country. When we turn in on ourselves in our selfishness it inevitably makes us unfit to love God and our neighbor.

V6-7, 'They did not say, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?' And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.' Here we see the ingratitude and forgetfulness of sin. All that we have is given to us from above, our whole existence, our every pleasure and provision, even our ability to enjoy good things all comes from God. Israel was delivered from slavery, preserved in the wilderness, and brought into a promised land, but all of this is forgotten in the face of present pursuits. Not only are we ungrateful for God's gifts we pervert them; 'you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.' Israel took the bumper crops and offered them to idols, they took the mountains and turned them into shrines for idolatry, we are the same with the gifts we have. We have taken our bodies, our sexuality, marriage, material things, all the things of this creation and turned into instruments that facilitate our rebellion against the one who gives them to us.

V11-13 we have the heart of the problem, 'Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate,' declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.' Israel in her sin has done the unthinkable she has exchanged truth for lies, treasure for worthlessness, and God for empty and dead idols. But this is what we do when we are living for sin and not for God. There is a call here to be shocked by the absolute insanity and self-destruction; from the complete wrongness and sinfulness of doing this. God spells it out in two evils. Firstly, they have forsaken God, the fountain of living water; and secondly, they have made their own gods that can hold no water. God uses the symbol of water, something life giving to those living in semi-arid conditions. On the one hand is God a neverending fountain of life giving water who quenches thirst, and sustains life. And next to this is a self-made cistern that is supposed to catch rain water but has cracks in it and it can hold no water resulting only in thirst and death. We must not miss the double evil described. We all know viscerally the emptiness of sin, the emptiness of trying to find something to satisfy our hearts, to build a future on, to root our identities in. This part will make sense to us, we know what it means to be thirsty. But we overlook the evil of forsaking God. This is the greater part of their sin and ours, and yet the part that we underestimate. There is no greater sin than this one. Social injustices, self-harm, these are nothing in comparison to our sin against God. The word 'forsaken' brings us back to the marriage metaphor. God as a husband rescues us from slavery, provides for us, sustains us, loves us, makes us heirs in all that is His. And we leave Him for other lovers. But God is greater than the metaphor for His is more than simply a husband. He is God, He is Creator, He is the literal Lord of all to whom all things owe their existence and praise. We are not just stupid and self-destructive, we are wicked. Jeremiah goes on and describes how sin is a choice to go back to slavery, he describes sin in terms I cannot read in a public context where families are present.

We are not aware enough of how sin is an affront to God. Even though we know that God is all seeing, this will not deter us; even though we are never out of His presence this does not restrain us; He is jealous for our loyalty with a righteous jealousy but we dare to provoke Him; we do not care about what He loves or hates; we disregard His threats of punishment; we despise His grace, mercy and past faithfulness; we prefer our own wisdom to His; renounce His right to rule us; choose the vileness of sin to His purity; the emptiness of sin rather than a fullness of joy in Him. Our sin is as great as God is glorious, and He is infinitely holy. For this reason Hell is an infinite punishment; He deserves infinite praise, with angels crying out in worship forever and ever; and the payment for sin against Him can be paid by none other than the infinitely valuable God-man Jesus Christ. He offers us Himself; all His treasures in His Son; full adoption; an eternal inheritance; and we prefer the emptiness of sin. We are worse than that ungrateful child that leaves its parents, or that wife that is a serial adulteress.

It is wrong for us to be about a half-hearted repentance, to sow seed in ground and hearts that is still hard. Ground and hearts that still have all the weeds still growing in it. We need to break up the fallow ground of our hearts. If you read Jeremiah 3:6-11 you will see that this is exactly what the people of God did, they did a half-hearted repentance, v10, 'Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.' If you were God would you forgive?

A proper response to sin

The next section really shocks us because despite how terrible our sins are, despite how terrible our repentance is God gives another chance, 3:12-14, 'Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, 'Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord. Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord; for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.' With such a horrible sight of our sins we would expect that our instinct would be to run from God not to Him; but the point of seeing the depth of our sins is to show how utterly gracious God is in light of how utterly undeserving we are. Is God willing to forgive such terrible sin? How can we know? Romans 5:6-10, 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.'

God presses the matter again in v19-20 before we see the hard hearts crumble in repentance. Hear again those two pictures of an ungrateful child and an unfaithful spouse, 'I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord.' You can feel the pathos, the pain, the utter wrongness in the face of such generosity and vulnerability.

The text has a dramatic pause at this point. We have come to a climactic point where the argument and accusations are over, a plain emotive stating of the facts has taken place. What is the only way we can respond to such love and grace. V21-25 models a response, it shows us what true repentance looks like, what breaking up the hard ground of our hearts entails. Firstly, weeping, v21, 'A voice on the bare heights is heard, the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons because they have perverted their way; they have forgotten the Lord their God.' Here we see sorrow over sin, in particular the way in which they perverted their way, and the way in which they treated God. Sorrow over sin is not only sorrow of the consequences but for the sin itself.

Secondly, we see there is pleading, this is a crying out to God for His mercy and forgiveness, for His deliverance because we need saving.

Thirdly, we see that repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning to God, v22, "'Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.'" "Behold, we come to you, for you are the Lord our God.' We see that it is also a believing repentance that responds to the grace of God's forgiveness.

Fourthly, repentance involves a true sight of sin that it is a delusion, v23, 'Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains.' This is of course a reference to the idolatrous ceremonies that would take place on various hilltops. Fifthly, there is a valuing and seeing the true sufficiency of God, 'Truly in the Lord our God

is the salvation of Israel.'

Sixthly, a recognition of the destructiveness of sin, v24, "'But from our youth the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers labored, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters.'

Seventh, a despising of oneself, 'Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonor cover us.'

A recognition that sin is against God, 'For we have sinned against the Lord our God.' The ubiquitous nature of sin, 'we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day.' And a recognition that sin is disobeying the will of God, 'and we have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.'

This is what God calls breaking up the fallow ground, not sowing among thorns. Friends how is your sensitivity to sin; do you feel it, are you in horror of it, do you see what an affront it is to sin against God? Do you see God hatred of sin but love of sinners in sending Christ to save you? Will you heartily commit to hating sin and waging war against it?