

A NEW CONTRACT

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:2-33

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April 9, 2000

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Listen, again, to the Word of God to the prophet Jeremiah.

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

First, a history lesson. God’s word *never* comes to us in a historical vacuum. God *always* speaks to us within a particular historical situation. If we’re going to understand and respond appropriately to God’s Word we need to know a little of the historical background against which God spoke through Jeremiah.

Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem 600 years before the birth of Jesus. He began his ministry when King Josiah was 21 years old. Josiah became king of Judah at the young age of 8. When he was twenty-six years old he began to repair the temple which had fallen into ruin. In the process someone found the book of the Law of God, probably the book of Deuteronomy. The book was brought to King Josiah and he began to read it. After reading it he tore his robes in anguish. He realized the nation wasn’t obeying God’s Law and would incur God’s anger. So Josiah began to reform the nation according to God’s Laws. He renounced the pagan practices so prevalent in his kingdom. He rooted out every sign of pagan worship. He tore down pagan altars. He smashed heathen idols. He executed pagan priests and desecrated their bones. He enforced the celebration of Passover and all the other holidays mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy. He was utterly ruthless imposing the law of God upon his nation. King Josiah brought God back into politics and into the life of the nation with a vengeance.

Jeremiah began his ministry just about the time Josiah began to impose his draconian reforms. The prophet initially supported the young king’s policies. It was good to have a godly king after godless, immoral leaders. But eventually Jeremiah became disillusioned. Sure, people obeyed the Law of God, but out of fear of death. People didn’t really know or love God. So sometime late in his ministry, the disillusioned prophet Jeremiah heard God speak to him. “I’m going to make a new contract with my

people. I'm going to write my law on their hearts. No longer will I use the government to enforce my laws."

In other words, God reveals himself to be like a loving parent. Every parent longs for the day their children will obey society's rules because they want to, not because they'll be punished. My wife looks forward to the day our boys will take off their caps in the house without being told. I'll rejoice when my sons remember that *Mother's Day* is coming up without my telling them. Parents long for the day our children will say *please* and *thank you* because they're genuinely grateful not because mom and dad tell them to -- whether they feel like it or not. Parents want their children to grow up and internalize the rules that help us live together.

Parents are right to impose the law on young children. Many parents take their young children to church whether or not they want to go. We impose God's Law on them. Very few children actually enjoy going to Sunday school or church. Very few would go if given the option. Young children not infrequently squirm and cause a commotion in church. This is perfectly normal behavior but it embarrasses parents. Unfortunately, when this happens over a period of time, parents often give up and stop taking their young children to church to avoid the stress. When children reach their teen years it becomes more and more difficult to enforce Sunday school and church attendance. But Christian parents long to see their children *eventually* come to know and love God. And a surprising number of young people who rebel against church in their teens eventually come back home to God in their thirties. Some even become ministers, elders and deacons. They eventually come back, not because of threats, but because of the slow working of God's grace in their hearts. God writes his law on their hearts.

Today a good many people want to impose God's laws on the nation like Josiah did. Some people want to place the *Ten Commandments* on the walls of every school in America. Last Sunday on *60 Minutes* Andy Rooney gave a somewhat irreverent commentary on the *Ten Commandments*. He showed a monument in front of a school containing a bronze plaque on which were inscribed the *Ten Commandments*. He asked approaching students and teachers if they could name some of the *Ten Commandments*. No! Andy Rooney reinforced for me that God is far less interested in having the *Ten Commandments* displayed on walls than he is in having them written on our hearts.

Some want to impose prayer in the public school class rooms. When I was in high school in Delaware we said the *Lord's Prayer* the wrong way every day using *trespasses* rather than *debts*. Most of us probably *said* the prayer rather than *prayed* it. But what really impressed me was seeing Lloyd Wells bow his head at the lunch table. Wells was an *All State* and *Little All American* football player at Newark High School. At the lunch table, surrounded by high school boys and girls, he'd bow his head and thank God for his food. No law made Lloyd Wells pray. No law could really keep him from praying. He prayed because God's law was written on his heart.

Our political leaders have more than once attempted to impose God's laws on the nation. *Prohibition* attempted to impose sobriety on our nation. Instead it led to boot leg whiskey, speakeasies, and organized crime. Abortion was once outlawed but it didn't keep women from seeking illegal abortions that often led to death. Sabbath observance was imposed on Pennsylvanians but most of us found a way around the law.

Don't misinterpret what I'm saying. God's laws are good. And how much more wonderful our nation would be if we obeyed God's law. We need laws. Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law of God. Presbyterians have a *Book of Order*, laws that ministers, elders and deacons promise to obey. Good parents have rules that help families live together. So, ironically, until hearts are truly changed we'll always need laws to protect the weak and innocent. We need speed limits. We need safety belt laws. We need laws to protect against the abuse of guns. We need laws to protect minorities. Some people believe that the imposition of Civil Rights legislation in the sixties led, eventually to changed hearts in the South. But in the industrial North riots broke out in opposition to enforced bussing to accomplish integration. So good laws will always be needed but they will be resisted and broken until they're written on our hearts.

Josiah's experiment should have taught the Christian church not to expect the government to do our work as a church. It's the church's responsibility to teach the law of God, not the government's. It's the church's responsibility to teach us how to pray, not the government's. And it's not the government's responsibility to impose God's law on us. It's God's responsibility to fulfill God's promise by writing God's laws on our hearts. And by God's grace it happens. Every once in a while I inwardly rejoice when

I discover I or my love ones have obeyed God, not out of fear of punishment or hope for reward, but simply out of love for God.

My hope for the world is for God to write his laws on the hearts of all people. Wouldn't it be great if God wrote his law on the hearts of Irish Catholics and Protestants and on the hearts of Palestinians and Jews as well as on the hearts of affluent American's? What a wonderful world it would be.

Last week I read that in 1997, on the night before Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, an eight-year-old Israeli boy named Yuval was run over and killed by a car on a busy street in Tel Aviv. On the same night and in the same hospital where they had brought Yuval, a little Palestinian girl named Rim was dying of a failing heart. Yuval's grieving parents offered their son's still-beating heart to any child who needed it. Rim was chosen. After the surgery was done, the Israeli mother and the Palestinian mother embraced each other, sharing tears of joy and grief, as a Jewish boy's heart beat inside a Palestinian girl's breast. When an Israeli mother gives the heart of her son to a child of Israel's enemy, I see a sign that God *is* writing his law on the hearts of people today and I have hope for the world. Amen.

Let us pray: Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love. We have not loved our neighbors, and we have refused to hear the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience; Write your law upon our hearts, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reminds me of an Israeli mother whose ~~son~~
lost her son on a Roman Cross. And the wonderful
Hospital promise that his still-beating heart can
replace our ~~broken~~ hearts.

Create in me a clean heart