

SECOND SUNDAY OF END TIME: LAST JUDGMENT

Jeremiah 8:4-7

How Will We React to Sin?

I don't know if you've noticed, but our economy is kinda sorta in the tank right now. How did we get in this mess? I'm no economics major, but I think that spending more than we could afford probably didn't help. As a country we did it, and many of us as individuals did it. We went to the bank too often, not to make deposits, but for more credit, and now we're paying the piper. Yet how do some propose fixing the problem? Borrowing and spending. Once again, I'm no expert, but to my untrained mind the math sure doesn't seem to add up. It seems to me we're only digging our hole deeper.

Sometimes our reaction to a failure is just as disastrous, and even more disastrous, than the failure itself. Sometimes our reaction to a mistake turns a hurdle into a wall, second-and-twelve into fourth-and-twenty. Sometimes we can so overcompensate when we hit ice on the road that we end up veering in the other direction, into an even more dangerous scenario. Sometimes we are so determined to do something that we end up doing more damage than if we'd done something more thoughtful, or even nothing at all; we throw the baby out with the bathwater.

In our first lesson, God laments not merely Israel's sin but especially Israel's reaction to sin. Not only had Israel failed in its thoughts, words, and deeds, and fallen drastically short of God's glory, but in reaction to those sins Israel was failing and falling even more, digging its hole deeper, backsliding farther and farther from God and salvation. Just as spending to get out of debt defies common sense and personal experience, sinning to get out of sin, or lying to get out of a lie, is just as baffling. Yet that is what Israel was doing.

So, the question for us, then, is how do we react to our sin? Notice, I didn't ask whether you sin. That's not in dispute. All of us are sinners. No, how you *react* to your sin? Do you seek a way out, as the Lord promises all who are tempted, or do you dig that hole deeper, try to spend your way out of debt? The Lord gives a few examples of how not to react to sin in our first lesson, beginning by appealing to our common sense, asking, "*When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?*" Let's take a brief look at each wrong reaction to sin.

1. "*Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return.*" God here describes doubling down on sin, when rather than confessing our error we become even more stubborn in it. Not only do we let go of God's grace in such a way, but we constantly make our grip on sin more firm. And so we backslide. We give ourselves to the sin in question, and begin to argue that it isn't really sin at all, that God's Word is either unclear on the matter, though it is not, or that God's Word is actually wrong or outdated. And so, rather than returning to our loving Savior, we wander ever farther from Him. We put on blinders. We refuse to look in the mirror, knowing we won't like what we see, and we fall further and further down Mount Calvary toward the trash heap of Gehenna. And so the husband or wife in a struggling marriage, instead of striving to mirror the healing love of Christ, throws fuel on the fire, taking an attitude toward his or her spouse that Christ would never take toward His Church. And the alcoholic drinks more rather than dare to soberly consider what he's done to his or her life and the lives of loved ones. And the cheating student or employee cheats even more to keep the charade going rather than stepping back and looking for an honest path back to honorable service. And the exasperating parent berates his or her child even more harshly rather than exposing his or her weakness and seeking to learn the patience and mercy of the heavenly Father.

2. *“I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle.”* God here describes ignorant bliss of sin. This is the path we take when we fail to examine ourselves, to consider ourselves in the light of God’s Word, to weigh our lives in the balance of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps this happens because we are afraid of what we might find. Perhaps this happens because we’ve never learned how to examine ourselves. Perhaps this happens because we’ve grown distracted or lazy. Or perhaps this happens because we’ve failed to take the time to ponder and review what God expects of us, what His will is for the various aspects of our lives. And so, rather than asking how God would have us live, we live as we would have us live, and expect God to deal with it, or at least to keep quiet, whether in our living arrangements, or our work dealings, or in our church life, or in our care for our bodies.

3. *“Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the LORD.”* God here describes a failure to pay attention to time, to put off until tomorrow what we’ve been given today to do. And so we talk about young people just sowing their wild oats, or wait until we’re in a hospital bed to call the pastor, or plan to get serious about the faith life of our families when we have kids, or when the kids are old enough for Sunday School, or for Catechism, all the way until the time for teaching our children what it is to be faithful Christians has long passed and all we’ve left them for a faith inheritance is an example of indifference and delay. And so we promise to quit whatever sin has addicted us next week, or to set aside time for our families next month, or to crack open our Bibles after we finish this next novel, or to get more fervent in prayer once sweeps week is over. And in this way we gamble on time we may indeed not have, that we have no promise we’ll be given. *“This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,”* the psalmist says (Psalm 118:24). *“Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation,”* St. Paul warns (2 Corinthians 6:2). Don’t, as I’ve done before, plan your new diet right up until you hit a bigger waist size, so to speak. Take hold of the time God has given you and seek Him while He can be found.

“You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?” God warned Israel, as a parent warns his or her child, because He loved them, because like the compassionate father in the parable of the prodigal son, he longed to run to them as they returned, to embrace them again, to forgive, to show mercy. God warns us for the same reason. Through Christ’s death for our sin, our debt is erased. Left to ourselves, we can only increase it. So return to Him. Common sense and personal experience tell us it’s the only smart thing to do. More importantly, God Himself tells us it’s the only smart thing to do.

What about that economy? I don’t know. As I said before, I’m no economics major. In fact, my wife doesn’t even trust me to balance our checkbook. I do know this, however: it’s probably best not to try to spend your way out of debt. Reactions can be dangerous things. If that’s true in economics, how much more in our faith life. Remember the right reaction next time you stumble. Return to God, and He will return to you. Amen.