

To God Alone Be The Glory

“You wouldn’t know a good thing if it slapped you in the face.” Not a nice thing to say. It insinuates that someone is so daft, they can’t tell good from bad, advantage from disadvantage, the sky from a hole in the ground.

As we consider our Jeremiah sermon text on this Reformation Sunday, we are presented with a contrast between the two main covenants that the good Lord has made with humankind. And I hope it would bother you if some unloving person said, “You wouldn’t know the New Covenant from the Old if one of them slapped you in the face.” Now I hope you’re saying: “Challenge accepted.” Let’s study again the difference between the two covenants with the goal of being able to explain them to someone else. May the Lord put his teachings in our minds once again today and fill us with joy as we praise him, because GOD’S NEW COVENANT MAKES US FREE.

Just consider **the Old Covenant** for a few minutes. In it God told the people what they could eat. “Yes” to chicken, beef, fish, and lamb. “No” to horse, camel, pig, eel, squid, lobster, shrimp, eagle, owl, hawk, and crow. *The Lord told his people they had to gather for worship in one location no matter where they lived in the country. Of course, they had to go only three times a year, but they had to go, and they didn’t have cars. When you got to “church,” you couldn’t go inside and sit down—no, no, no. You were unholy. Come onto the grounds, yes, but stay outside. The pastor (they called him a priest) would take your prayers inside for you and bring God’s blessing out to you. *The Lord told the people how to worship. And it was

always the same. A perfect animal had to die, shedding its blood instead of yours, so you could stay alive. And you always came home from “church” smelling like burnt sheep or toasted goat. *Under the Old Covenant God required you to marry a relative, but not too close a relative. *If you touched the dead body of anything, including a loved one, you were unclean. If you got a skin condition, you were unclean. If you had any sort of bodily emission under any circumstance, except for #1 and #2, you were unclean. If you went to war, you were unclean. If you touched mildew, you were unclean. Whenever you were unclean, you had to go through a ritual to be considered clean again. *In the Old Covenant, God told you when to work and when not to work. He told you how to plant your fields and how to harvest. He prescribed the punishment for most crimes. **If you get the impression that God controlled almost every aspect of their lives, like a parent who insists on always holding the hand of a child while crossing a busy street, you’re getting the right impression. The apostle Peter once described the Old Covenant as a burden that “*neither we nor our forefathers*” were able to carry (Acts 15).

“So then the Old Covenant was bad, right?” No! It was glorious! (See 2 Corinthians 3:7-11.) God, of his own volition, actually showed himself to his people when he set up the Old Covenant (see Exodus 24. It was scary, but he talked directly to them. We don’t get such a privilege under the New Covenant. But we do get God’s message more clearly explained so that we know his tender heart toward us in Jesus Christ. But there was tenderness in the Old Covenant too. Through pictures and symbols it pointed people to the coming Messiah and assured them of forgiveness.

“So what’s with all those Old Covenant laws?” God was trying to keep his people separate from the wicked nations around them, not only for them as individuals, but especially so the Messiah he was sending would be raised by believing parents within a believing nation. The Old Covenant was good!

But it was also a burden. Laws, regulations, statutes, decrees, stipulations, conditions, dos, don’ts. The best attitude the Old Covenant could generate in the minds of believers was, “I must.” “I must do this: God said so.” If a Christian today frequently says “must, should, ought to, have to” when talking about obeying God, it might be good to check whether some Old Covenant thinking is still rattling around in their faith.

The Old Covenant had a built-in weakness because it was two-sided. The Lord said, “I will be your God **if** you keep these decrees” (e.g. Deuteronomy 30:10). And the people responded, “*Everything you have said we will do*” (see Exodus 24). But they didn’t. They wouldn’t keep up their end of the bargain. God should have walked away and left the people to face all the consequences of their sins by themselves.

But in **the New Covenant** we see what a gracious God we have. He doesn’t want even one person to be damned. So he promised through his faithful prophet Jeremiah: ³¹“*The time is coming,*” declares the LORD, “*when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,*” declares the LORD. See why God promised to establish the New Covenant? The New

Covenant doesn’t need to slap us in the face for us to see that it’s way better than the Old.

Listen as the Lord rolls out the New Plan. ³³“*This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,*” declares the LORD. The phrase ‘*after that time*’ refers to when Jesus would be born, die, and rise from the dead. See, God revealed himself at the founding of the New Covenant too. But it wasn’t scary this time. Jesus came in such gentleness and humility. The only harshness in the New Covenant was what Jesus endured in order to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross.

In the New Covenant God promises, after that time ^{33b}“*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*” This sentence used to confuse me, until I looked at the Hebrew word for “law” in this verse. We could translate more clearly: “*I will put my **teachings** in their minds,*” which includes the good news, the gospel. God will bring his whole message to us and deliver it to our brains through our ears. So then, this church service is a fulfillment of what God promised in our text. Right now the Holy Spirit is writing God’s teachings on our hearts. He does this whenever you read your Bible or listen to his message.

Next the Lord says, ^{33c}*I will be their God, and they will be my people.* Here we have a subtle difference between the Old and the New. In the Old Covenant God said, “I will be your God,” and the people themselves said, “We will be your people; we will obey.” But in the New Covenant, God speaks **both** parts: *I will be their God, AND they will be my people.* See the subtle difference? See how huge the difference is? Imagine how

little confidence you would have about your eternal destiny if any part of it depended on you? That would be the same as the weakness in the Old Covenant system: the people had an end to hold up, an end they were unable to hold up. But in the New Covenant people have no end to hold up. God does it all. “Here, have the forgiveness of sins.” How much does it cost? “For you, nothing. Jesus already paid. It cost him his blood.” What do I have to do? “Nothing. Here, just have it.” Thank you, dear Lord. Your forgiveness is just what we needed. Your NEW COVENANT HAS SET ME FREE. Now I live for you from a joyful heart, because I want to. The “have to” and the “must” and the “should” are all gone. I gladly line myself up under you just to say thank you for saving me. I delight to keep your laws.

Our text goes on to say, ³⁴*“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD.* This sentence also used to confuse me. It sounds like we don’t need to teach each other anymore under the New Covenant. But that’s not the point. Think how the Old Covenant worked. Through the outward actions of the people, especially those endless animal sacrifices at the temple—through their deeds the people would know God’s gracious heart, believe in him, and so be saved. So the prophets and the priests were constantly telling the people, “You’ve just got to keep all these regulations and decrees. It’s the only way you are going to know the Lord.” See? God was working from ‘the outward actions of a godly life’ into their hearts, like how children are taught. But in the New

Covenant God treats his people like adults. The Holy Spirit starts working in our hearts through the gospel, and then generates in us joyful outward actions as our thanks. He does this in all his people, from the just-baptized babies on up to the wisest of elderly Christians.

But in the New Covenant our outward actions (deeds) are not the most important thing to God. In our text God states what is important: ^{34b}*“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”* Let’s get at this passage in a roundabout way. Have you ever tried to unbend a paper clip and make it perfectly straight? And then did you try to bend it back into its factory form as a paper clip? It’s really hard to restore something that has been twisted out of shape. Now we’re ready for the passage. *“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”* The word for “wickedness” comes from the Hebrew word for “twisted.” What a picture of sin’s effect on us and our lives! Like when you harsh out on a close friend, and you apologize, and they forgive you, but you don’t hang out anymore. It’s really hard to restore something that’s been twisted out of shape. But God will send all our twistedness away. He’ll straighten us out completely. He’ll remember our sins no more. He’ll bend us into something useful to him and to others. What a grace from God, an undeserved gift!

To access the other part of the verse, just imagine a scene that would never actually happen. Imagine God the Father being called to the witness stand. The huge gallery of the courtroom is filled with sinners. Look closely. Yep, there you are

up in the gallery, watching, hoping, because your eternity depends on the testimony given. The prosecuting attorney (the Accuser, Satan) stands before God the Father so smug, as if thinking to himself, "I've got this in the bag! Here's a witness who never lies, and who knows everything. I'll win, and the souls of all the people who ever sinned even once, I'll take to hell with me." He clears his throat and says, "Will the witness please tell the court all the sins these people have committed." Jesus, the awesome Defense attorney, catches his Father's eye, and points to his hands and side. And the Father says, "I don't remember a single thing they did wrong." "What?!" Satan blasphemously screeches at God, "How can it be that Almighty God who knows all things is unable to recount the sins of these people?" The Father leans forward looking straight into the wicked foe's eyes, saying deliberately, "I have decided by an act of my divine will never to remember their sin. It's the New Covenant. They win! You lose!"

Now imagine that the people in a congregation start to take the New Covenant for granted. They lose their joy over hearing again and again that God has forgotten their sin completely because of Jesus. Their neighbors ask them, "What's the most important teaching in your church? What's your church really all about?" And they correctly answer: "Jesus Christ died on the cross and paid the penalty for all sin." But the neighbor responds: "Well, that's nice, but our church is all about love. We go out of our way to show love to people who are different from us." And because the people in that congregation have lost their joy over hearing again and again that Jesus took away

all their sins, everyone there decides that 'showing love' is more important than 'being loved by God.'

I hope you're asking yourself, "What's so bad about showing love?" And the answer, of course, is nothing: God really wants us to show love. But as soon as 'our showing love' becomes more important than 'God showing love to us,' we are no longer in the New Covenant. We've slipped back into the Old Covenant, and then we are required to show love perfectly, all the time, to everyone, as if we have an end of the bargain to keep up. And that is a burden that neither we nor our fathers or mothers have been able to bear. If we stay in the New Covenant, and keep our focus on what Jesus did for us, the Holy Spirit will lead us to love one another. Love will grow on us as easily as apples grow on apple trees, but the most important thing will still be what God did for us through Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the Reformation every year, in part to remind ourselves how easy it would be for us to stop teaching the New Covenant the way God presents it, how easy it would be to slip back under the Old Covenant. And now I hope you can see that any covenant where we sinners have a part to uphold is thereby flawed. That's why God established the New Covenant. **GOD'S NEW COVENANT MAKES US FREE** from all sin through Christ and gives us happy hearts from which obedience springs up like a field of recently planted corn. We don't need to have the New Covenant slap us in the face. We know the New Covenant is good because God put his teachings in our hearts through his Word. Hold on to this truth.