

Sermon for February 17, 2019 - 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5–8 (NIV84)

Theme: Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD

- 1) Humanism Hurts
- 2) Only in the Lord can we truly flourish

⁵ This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. ⁶ He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. ⁷ “But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. ⁸ He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

Do you know what humanism is? It’s a philosophy that claims that humans have limitless potential to make the world a better place through science and joint activity. Humanism invites us to believe that we have the potential to do great things; that, united together, humanity can even accomplish godlike things.

I am not going to lie: talk about humanity uniting together into a grand brotherhood – solving seemingly insurmountable problems together - sounds great. So does the encouragement to believe in yourself and rely on your own potential. But as wonderful sounding as these ideas are, do you know where they come from? The devil himself! You see, humanism is just a variation of the same temptation Satan used on Eve in the garden of Eden: the desire to be god – in charge of our own future, and masters of our own fate. “Religion is holding us back,” many humanists claim. “We don’t need any god. We can do it ourselves.” If that doesn’t sound like the same temptation that originally caused mankind to fall into sin, I don’t know what does!

But isn’t there some truth to humanistic philosophy? Isn’t the western world full of examples of what humanism’s adherents can accomplish? On top of this, humanism seems to be the basis of every democratic society, so how can it be a bad thing?

While humanism might seem like a successful philosophy, it always fails in the end. How do I know? Because the ideas promoted by humanism are nothing new. They have been around ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. History is full of examples of humanism – just under different names – and it always fails. Why? Because humanism doesn’t take into consideration how thoroughly corrupt the human heart actually is! Worse yet, humanism tries to usurp God’s throne.

Now, we might be tempted to think that humanism doesn’t really pose a threat to church-going Christians like us. We put our trust in the LORD, and not ourselves. But here’s the thing: humanism permeates every aspect of our culture. It is the base message of modern secular

education. From government to entertainment, humanism is promoted everywhere: and we would be foolish to think that we aren't affected.

Therefore, with the prophet Jeremiah as our guide, let us heed the LORD's warning against humanism under the theme: **Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD. Why? Because: 1) Humanism Hurts. 2) Only in the Lord can we truly flourish.**

Part One: Humanism hurts.

Our sermon text was originally penned by the prophet Jeremiah under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit around 600 years before Jesus was born. Here's the situation: the people of Judah wanted to become more like the nations around them. They started adopting many of their economic and worship practices – abandoning the civil and ceremonial laws God had given them. Even though the LORD sent prophets to warn them about their evil, they didn't listen to them. When the LORD started holding true to his threats – allowing the Babylonians to come up against them, they still refused to turn to the Lord in repentance. Instead they looked to Egypt to protect them from danger. In short, the Jews put their trust in humans, instead of the Lord.

Against this back drop, the LORD offers this general principle as a warning against all who put their hope in anything human instead of him:

⁵ This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

Now let us understand what the LORD is and isn't saying in these verses. He is not saying that a person cannot go to the doctor when sick, seek the protection of a police officer when in danger, or buy an insurance policy in case something happens. The LORD has given all people various gifts – providing for us through every God pleasing vocation he has allowed to arise for the benefit of society.

The problem is when we begin to rely on either other humans or ourselves as the source of our protection, peace and providence, instead of merely being the tools God uses to accomplish his work. Worse yet is when our hearts turn away from the LORD in order to place our trust in people instead of the LORD. For example: believing evolutionary scientists who say the world is billions of years old, instead of what God recorded in Scripture; or putting our trust in our democratic system to solve all of society's evils, instead of the LORD who has given up His Son for the salvation of all. Probably the most blatant example of humanism is when people brag about what they accomplish by their own intellect and strength - all the while forgetting that, without the LORD's blessing, they would accomplish nothing.¹

And what will the end result be for the person who puts his trust in either himself or other humans instead of the LORD? God himself tells us:

He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

In other words, all his hope will come to nothing. Yes, unless his relationship with the LORD is restored, the person who trust in anything human instead of the LORD, remains under God's curse. When a humanist's time of grace is over, they will end up in hell - suffering the grief of being separated from God and all his goodness forever. Mark God's warning well: humanism hurts!

Now, someone might be thinking: "I see how the world should take this warning to heart, but how does this text apply to us? We Christian Canadians aren't like Judah, who looked to their mighty neighbors to the south in order to protect them from an invasion from the north. We trust in God to keep us safe from harm, not any government – foreign or domestic."

And while I don't doubt this to be true, how often don't we act as if it's only up to us to provide for our bodily welfare – pursuing our personal prosperity at all costs (even if that cost is giving up time on God's Word)? How often don't we forget to ask the LORD to bless our efforts and help us grow in the gifts he has given us? How often aren't we tempted to be wowed at new technology, proud of our nation for its accomplishments, and proud of ourselves - all the while forgetting the LORD's hidden hand behind it all? How often aren't we tempted to be envious of what others have and believe them when they brag about accomplishing everything on their own?

Yes, the temptation to place our trust in people instead of the LORD is very real – especially when we perceive their self-made outward success. But remember what the outcome of such humanistic hope is: even though the humanist might seem successful at first, the truth is that he stands on a slippery slope. None of his wealth and accomplishments will help him when he must give an accounting to the LORD for his life.ⁱⁱ He is cursed – not because God doesn't love him, but because he refuses to humble himself before the LORD in order to receive God's love. He has fallen for the devil's trap: acting as if he himself is god – the master of his own fate. Sadly, such a person's life will be revealed as a life lived in vain. Everything he works so hard to attain disappears the moment his last breath passes from his lips.

Yes, humanism certainly hurts. Let us, therefore, repent of all the times we have forgotten the LORD – placing our trust in either ourselves or others instead of him. Then, in the peace of forgiveness that Jesus won for us through his cross, we will be encouraged to place our full confidence in the LORD alone – understanding that it is only through faith in him that we truly flourish.

Part Two: Only in the Lord can we truly flourish

⁷ *"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.*

Yes, happy is the man who places his trust and confidence in God alone. But this invites the question: what does such confidence look like? Does trusting in the LORD mean that we should refuse to go to the hospital when sick, or take medicine when it is prescribed – all under the notion that God will heal us miraculously if he wants to?

No, that is not the kind of trust the LORD describes here. Remember, God is the one who gave a variety of gifts to people. He himself takes care of us through the hands of others. It's therefore

safe to say that the LORD wants us to make use of the people he places in our lives – as well as the talents and vocations he has given them

Well, what, then, does it mean to trust in the LORD? Listen to God himself describe it in our text:

⁸ He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

When you look at a tree, all you see is what is above the ground: it's boughs, branches, foliage and fruits. You don't see what is beneath the ground – it's root system that seeks out water and nourishment.

A Christian's trust in the LORD is much like the root system of a tree. We can't physically see it, but it is there –giving the Christian a solid foundation, and always looking for nourishment. And what does a Christian's root system seek? The living water of Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ And where is this water found? Only in the Gospel. Yes, God's Word and sacraments are the streams wherein we find the living water of Jesus. Just as God has given trees roots that reach out for water, so the Holy Spirit have given Christians a faith that reaches out for the Gospel, that it might drink deeply of Jesus.

What result will this have for the Christian? The LORD himself tells us:

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

I want you to carefully note the wording of this verse. The LORD does not promise Christians an easy trouble-free life if they trust in him. No, the LORD may allow the heat of sorrow, sickness, want, persecution and death to test us. Truth be told, Jesus tells us to expect such things.^{iv} Why? So that we can worry and fret – looking for some human source of comfort? No, rather to encourage us to dig our roots more deeply into his Gospel promises. You see, as long as our faith drinks in the living water of Christ, we don't have to be afraid. Why? Because he is the source of our life – even allowing us to flourish under the harshest conditions.

This verse reminds me of a pecan farm in Arizona called Green valley. It's actually quite amazing to see: in the midst of a extremely harsh, hot and dry desert, is a lush pecan orchard that you would expect almost anywhere else but there. Farmers have spent a lot of time effort and money to get water to the trees from a nearby river and under water aquifers. But that invites the question: why? Why would they plant an orchard in these harsh conditions? Because, as long as those trees have access to water, those harsh conditions actually cause the trees to be more fruitful.

And what is true for the pecan trees at the Green Valley farm in Arizona, is also true for us. Unless people are well rooted in Jesus, all the harsh evils they face in life will, in the end, cause them to despair, wither and die. But, the opposite is true for Christians who are well rooted in Christ, whose souls are constantly watered through contact with the Word. The harsh conditions they face in life don't destroy them, but cause them to be more fruitful – more loving, patient, carrying and understanding so they can offer hope and assistance to anyone going through similar trials, pointing people to Christ in everything who is their strength.^v

And then, when the Christians' last hour on this earth comes, they don't have to be afraid of being cast away from God into hell. Why not? Because they have been so united with Christ through faith, that God the Father can't see any of their failures and sins; he only sees Jesus, and all the all the righteous things his Son accomplished for and through them. For this reason, the LORD will plant them in his eternal kingdom, as an eternal display of his glory.^{vi} He will give them peace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take to heart the LORD's encouragement for you today: **Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD.** 1) Humanism Hurts. 2) Only in the Lord can we truly flourish. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Psalm 127:1

ⁱⁱ Cf. Psalm 73 on this topic

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. John 4:10ff

^{iv} Cf. John 16:33

^v Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

^{vi} Cf. Isaiah 61:3