

WHY SETTLE FOR LESS?

Today's Text: Jeremiah, Chaps. 2-4

Extracts:

“Has a nation changed its gods, which are no gods? But *My people have changed their Glory for what does not profit. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid; be very desolate,*” says the Lord, “for My people have committed two evils: *they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn cisterns- broken cisterns that can hold no water*” [Jer. 2: 11- 13]

According to Gresham's Law, bad money drives good money out of circulation if they exchange for the same price.¹ The principle is applicable to many other fields outside of economics. For example, in sex education, the higher ideals of abstinence and fidelity have been displaced by the campaign for safe sex, using condoms. In organizations, it is the bad managers and workers who drive out the competent and hardworking employees! In a democracy, see how the militant Hamas party has driven the moderate PLO out of power in Palestine! In no distant future, it is conceivable that in the Western world, legalized single-parenting and same-sex marriages could drive heterosexual marriages out of circulation.

Gresham's Law is also very real in religious matters. In societies that give people the freedom to practise any religion of their choice, atheism and Satan worship are flourishing and threaten to drive the worship of the true God out of circulation. Fewer people now go to church in the advanced countries than in the past. In some of them, you cannot pray in schools or display religious symbols in public places. You cannot even preach against activities that God considers evil or immoral. Otherwise, you could be accused of intolerance! The best sellers are books that blaspheme Jesus Christ!

Why is it that when people have the choice between superior ideals and inferior ones, they go for the latter? Why do they settle for less when they can have the best? That is also the question that God asked the nation of Israel in the time of Jeremiah. Why would they reject God, the fountain of living waters and worship idols that cannot save? He is asking you the same question right now. What is your answer? In today's lesson, we shall help you to answer Him.

¹ “Gresham's law,” From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gresham%27s_law

1. How do you choose what to do?

A *sheik*, a pastor and a rabbi were once asked to explain how they shared the collections from their worship. The Moslem leader said that anyone who dared to ask him such a question was risking being stoned to death. The pastor said that it was the responsibility of his church committee to take such decisions. The rabbi was very forthright. He said that he would put all the money in a tray and throw it up. Anything that stayed up belonged to God and what came down was his!

In deed, every one of us may have a way of choosing one thing over another. If we were to do a survey, the answers we get could fall into one or more of the following, among others:

a) *We take what we are given*

We may find ourselves in circumstances that leave us with only one choice to make. For example, your race or place of birth, gender or colour of skin, etc., have placed certain constraints on the kind of choices that you can make, *whether you like it or not!* You may have grown up in the palace and you have to behave like a prince or princess. You may be the daughter of a clergyman and that puts constraints on your moral code. When such people then have the first whim of freedom to choose something else, they go for it! That is what we may call the *forbidden fruit syndrome*. That is why children who grew up under very restrictive moral or ethical codes are the first to act loose on college campuses or when they travel to more liberal societies. In most cases, they settle for less.

A good example from the Bible is Adam. He woke up one day to find a strange beautiful woman by his side. He had no choice in the matter. One joke has it that for several weeks, he did not talk to her. One day, Eve asked him, "Do you really love me?" He replied, "of course, I do. You are the most pretty woman in the whole world!" What a compliment, given that Eve was also the only woman on earth at the time! But God gave them the freewill to choose between good and evil. What did they do with that freedom? Eve influenced her husband to disobey God by both of them eating the forbidden fruit [**Gen. 3: 6-24**]. They used their first opportunity for free choice to settle for less.

b) *We take what is good enough for our purpose*

Sometimes, we are forced by circumstances to choose what is less than the best, even when we have the freedom to choose. Given the constraints of time or money or expertise, we choose an option that we consider *good enough* for our purpose. That is called *satisficing*, that is, some satisfaction and some sacrifice. For example, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the daughters of Lot were left alone with their father. They

feared that their family lineage could become extinct without husbands by which to raise their own children. What did they do? They got their father drunk and took turns to sleep with him. They became pregnant and bore sons by their father [Gen. 19: 30- 38]. They were satisfied to raise descendants but they sacrificed decency and morality. They settled for less instead of asking God to provide new husbands for the ones they had lost in Sodom.

As the saying goes, a river is crooked because it flows through the line of least resistance. Whenever we do anything that compromises God's position, we are satisficing. Maybe we are in a hurry or it is easier or more pleasurable or less risky. The bottom line is that we have settled for less!

c) *We always take the best!*

Some of us pride ourselves in claiming that we always go for the best when we choose, *all things being equal*. We make sure that we examine the pros and cons of *every possible option* and then choose the option that has the best potential for the best results according to our purpose. That is called *rational decision-making*. People use it in business, choice of spouse or settlement of disputes. The major limitation, however, is that we are not all knowing. Therefore, our rationality is *finite*!

Take the example from the Parable of the Unjust Steward [Lk 16: 1-13]. The man was on the verge of losing his job and the business owner asked him to give an account of his management. What did he do? He considered a number of options, such as begging or getting a new job. On the first, he considered himself too big to beg because he would be ashamed to do that. On the other hand, with his qualification, he could only get manual work and he was too old for that. Then, based on his rational analysis, he chose *neither* of those options. Instead, he decided to falsify the company's debtors' accounts so that on leaving the company, he could rely on the goodwill he had thus built. But, why did he not consider a third option, namely, to ask his master for forgiveness? It was because he did not know everything! He had to settle for less.

From the forgoing, we see that whatever human methods we may use cannot be *optimal*. They can only lead us to settle for less because "a man's steps are of the Lord" and "how then can man understand his own way?" [Prov. 20: 24]. No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God and "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; *nor can he know them because they are spiritually discerned*" [1 Cor. 2: 11,14]. That is the point that God is drawing to the attention of the nation of Israel and us all in today's lesson.

2. With God, you have only one choice!

The children of Israel had settled for less by (a) displacing their Glory (God) with the worship of idols, and (b) forsaking the fountain of living waters to collect unclean water in broken cisterns that could hold no water [**Jer. 2: 11, 13**]. What was wrong with these people, God asked, “Is Israel a servant? Is he a home born slave? Why is he plundered?” [v. 14]. God is also asking you some hard questions. Why are you running from pillar to post without respite? How come you lie on comfortable beds and cannot find sleep? Why are you working so hard and not seeing the reward? Why are you working so hard to attract attention and nobody notices? Why are you on alcohol or drugs even when your society applauds your lifestyle and calls you a star?

As He did with the nation of Israel in the time of Jeremiah, God wants to help you to analyze and understand your situation as follows:

a) *Examine your past!*

God asked Jeremiah to take the people’s memory back to their days in Egypt, how He had rescued them from bondage, led them through the wilderness and brought them “into a bountiful country, to eat its fruit and its goodness” [vv. 1-7]. In the past, when they had sinned and repented, God had forgiven them and planted them “a noble vine, a seed of highest quality” [vv. 20-21].

If you look at your past, you are bound to count blessings that you have now forgotten, breathtaking deliverances even when you were living in sin and disobedience. The idols could not help or save you. If you are now rich and famous, it was God who gave you the power [**Gen. 8: 17-18**].

b) *Examine your present!*

After bringing them safely into the Promised Land and protected them against the attacks of the Gentile nations far and near, what was God’s reward? They forsook Him and began to worship idols [**Jer. 2: 13,32**]. They defiled the land. The priests no longer asked for the Lord. The administrators no longer followed God’s law, and “the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit” [vv. 7, 8].

How about you? As a judge, how do your judgments glorify God? As a politician, are you compromising your faith? As a civil servant, have you taken bribes to undermine or compromise state policy? As a pastor, are you now afraid to speak against popular sins so as not to alienate your fat tithe payers? As a bishop, what have you done about members of the clergy that are involved in unacceptable sexual sins against children, men and women? As a prophet, are you afraid to declare to the congregation

what the Lord says? As a parent, are you encouraging your children to steal and cheat “like everybody else”? The idolatry of the heart [Ezek. 14: 3] is worse than merely bowing before an idol! If your heart is right with God, you will not bow before any other gods.

c) *How about your future?*

Having set up new gods to worship, God challenged the nation of Israel, “Where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble” [Jer. 2: 28]. But He knows that idols cannot save! That was why He gave them two options. One option was to continue in backsliding [vv. 23-25] and relate to God presumptuously [vv. 35-37]. In that case, the judgment would be quite swift. God would bring “disaster from the north, and a great destruction, ... and the destroyer of nations is on the way” [Jer. 4: 6, 13]. In other words, they would face exile in Babylon, “and when you are plundered, what will you do? ... They will seek your life” [v. 30]. That choice led to continued hardship and no idols could deliver them out of it.

The second option was to repent [Jer. 2: 19], and God said, “If you will return, O Israel, ... and if you will put away your abominations out of My sight, then you shall not be moved” [Jer. 4: 1]. God added, “I will not remain angry forever. *Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God*” [Jer. 3: 12, 13]. If they did that, He would give them God-fearing shepherds who would feed them “with knowledge and understanding” [v. 15], the nation of Israel would be able to call Him “my Father” and no longer turn away from Him [v. 19]. Then, the people would be able to proclaim, “Truly, in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel” [v. 23]. To choose the first option is to settle for less. To repent and return to God is to settle for the best.

In like manner, God has thrown the challenge at you. Right now, the pain of your wickedness and backsliding is telling on your health and wealth. You can choose to remain in that state and God will give you up as a reprobate mind [Rom. 1: 18-32]. That is like settling for less. Or, you can choose to confess your sins and return into fellowship with God. On account of the blood of Jesus that has been shed for you on Calvary, God will forgive you all unrighteousness [1 Jn 1: 8, 9]. That is like settling for the best!

3. Conclusion: Today is Decision Day for you!

Gresham's Law can also work in reverse.² That is, if people are given the choice of what money to accept, they will transact with the money they believe to have the highest long- term value. Even where civil laws contradict or conflict with

² Wikipedia, *Op. Cit.*

God's law or word, you have a choice. For example, in countries that recognize same-sex marriages, no church is forced to perform such ceremonies. Where abortion is permitted, you have a choice not to get involved. Therefore, when it comes to going with God or with idols, you can choose not to settle for less.

The Psalmist says, "O God, You have taught me *from my youth, and to this day* I declare Your wondrous works. *Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come*" [Ps. 71: 17-18]. On the eve of his death, Joshua challenged the children of Israel [Josh. 24: 15]:

If it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Like Joshua, I challenge you to decide today whether you will go with the crowd to serve the gods of short cuts, sexual immorality and wickedness or the God that loves you so much that He gave His only begotten Son to die for your sins. I know that you will choose wisely. Don't settle for less!