

## ***Going Forward, Not Backward***

Trinity CRC, September 4, 2022 AM

Ten Commandments series: Each One All In For Jesus

**Jeremiah 7; LD 34B**

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Intro: Since some of you were not here last week and the livestream audio didn't work for those joining us online, let me repeat what said last week by way of introduction:

There's a sense in which going to Synod this past June has become rather upsetting for me and, at the same time, inspiring. Here's why? Synod laid down, what some people say, is an unfairly heavy burden on gay people. I appreciate how people come to believe that. However, I think what synod did—and this inspires me—is to raise the bar for **each one of us** to take seriously what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. The synodical decision about sexuality only had one part about gay sex. But it called everyone, regardless of our gender and/or marital status, to refrain from all sorts of sexual sin and to live the holy lives that Jesus calls us and equips us to live.

Synod's decisions on sexuality were focused, of course, on the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment. So to help us see how the commandments call us ALL to a greater life of faithfulness and joy through Christ, I thought we'd do well to study all ten commandments once again. Whether it's the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment or any other one, the goal is greater discipleship. That's why I entitled this series, "Each one all in for Jesus." We are each called to be 100% devoted to Jesus, regardless of where our struggles in life lie, regardless of how that challenges us. The 10 commandments help us to see how we are doing: what we are doing well, what part of our lifestyle is perhaps hindering our walk with Jesus. And more importantly, each commandment draws us closer to Jesus as we seek to obey it with an "all-in" attitude and heart.

Now that we're looking at the first commandment today, I'll also let you know that I'm going to explore each of the commandments using four points that theologian Ray Ortlund uses. They are:

1. Revelation—what this commandment teaches us about God.
2. Confrontation—what it teaches us about our own sinful tendencies.
3. Instruction—what it teaches us about being better disciples. And,
4. Promise—what it teaches us about how God's work in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can help us.

Revelation, confrontation, instruction and promise. I'll try to follow that outline for all ten commandments.

Please join me in prayer now.

## Bible Reading: Jeremiah 7

<sup>1</sup> This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: <sup>2</sup> “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message:

“ Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. <sup>3</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods **to your own harm**, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

<sup>9</sup> “ Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, <sup>d</sup> burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> “ Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. <sup>13</sup> While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. <sup>15</sup> I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

[God continues speaking to Jeremiah:]

<sup>16</sup> “ So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. <sup>17</sup> Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? <sup>18</sup> The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes to offer to the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to arouse my anger. <sup>19</sup> But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?

<sup>20</sup> “ Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place—on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land—and it will burn and not be quenched.

<sup>21</sup> “ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! <sup>22</sup> For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, <sup>23</sup> but I gave them this command: **Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command**

**you, that it may go well with you.** <sup>24</sup> But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. **They went backward and not forward.** <sup>25</sup> From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. <sup>26</sup> But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.'

<sup>27</sup> "When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. <sup>28</sup> Therefore say to them, 'This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.

<sup>29</sup> " 'Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.

<sup>30</sup> " 'The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. <sup>31</sup> They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. <sup>32</sup> So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. <sup>33</sup> Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. <sup>34</sup> I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear congregation loved by the Lord Jesus,

When I said, “This is the Word of the Lord” at the end of our reading, did you really want to say, “Thanks be to God!”? Jeremiah 7 is a rather harsh passage with a tough message for God’s people of old... and perhaps for us today. It concerns idolatry, among other sins or violations of the ten commandments.

Of course, it seems rather removed from us. We can tell God isn’t pleased with his people because they have “done evil” in his eyes. “They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears (God’s) Name and have defiled it. They have also built altars to sacrifice their sons and daughters in the fire to false gods. But how is that related to us? Do we commit idolatry?

A woman named Jeannie Myer discovered that she does. A couple years ago, she wrote: “I worshipped idols last night. I realized just moments after waking this morning what I had done, and my heart sank...” She then explains how she’s a busy mom who is also going to university. She struggles with food. So when the stresses of family and school work got the better of her, she reaches for food to comfort herself. Along with that, she wastes time on Facebook and reading news, which also doesn’t make her feel any better. After reflecting on what happened, she concludes: “My sin last night wasn’t eating after 7 PM or wasting time on social media. My sin was turning my back on my God and looking to protein bars and a phone screen for comfort and strength. Almighty God, King of the Universe, was right there in the room with me. He paid with His Son’s blood and tears so I could have a relationship with Him. And if I’m honest, He didn’t even cross my mind last night.”

<https://medium.com/@jeannie Myers/true-confessions-of-an-idolater-a1e17231c6cb>

I can relate to that. Can you too? Often, the ways we fall into idolatry are not sins of commission but sins of omission. We simply forget to reach out to and trust the God who has promised to be our God and to faithfully walk with us through life. When we’re tempted by food, by drink, by porn, by social media, by anything else, do we simply bow down—as it were—to those things? Or do we remember that God is on our side and run to him?

## **Revelation**

So, turning back to Jeremiah 7, let’s consider idolatry, first of all, in the light of God’s revelation of himself in this passage. What is God teaching us about who he is? Who is this God who says, “You shall have no other gods!”? Why is he a jealous God?

In the words he gives to Jeremiah for the people of Judah, we get some clues. While we might hear those words and think God is angry, it’s probably more correct to hear his words as coming from a sorrow-filled heart. His people, whom he loves dearly, have chosen to break covenant with him.

God is a covenant making and covenant keeping God. That’s what we celebrate in baptism, like we did this morning. Baptism and God’s covenant more generally remind us that God is the first actor in our relationship with him. He comes to us in our

slavery to sin, just as he came to Israel while they were slaves in Egypt. We are in bondage and cannot free ourselves. We don't even know what true freedom is. But he does this incredible work of freeing Israel in the Old Testament. He delivers them from the oppression of Pharaoh and brings them into the land of freedom. Likewise, he delivers us from bondage to sin and the tyranny of the devil in our daily lives.

And so it is that we are now free to enjoy God. Free to enjoy all his blessings and honour him for these gifts. Free to live in peace with God and at peace with one another. Free to know God and enjoy him forever, as one confession puts it. Free to live life the way God designed us to live so that we find the greatest joy and blessing possible.

You'd think everyone would sign up for that. You'd think no one would resist such an offer or turn their back on such a generous and loving God. You'd think! But the reality is that we would do the same as the Israelites and we do indeed do the same as them. We just have different idols. And we'll get to that. For now, what's God revealing to us about himself that we need to understand in this first commandment?

His covenantal love means he cares deeply about us. He cared deeply about Israel at the time of Jeremiah too. But they kept turning their back on him. He gave his law to protect and bless them. Two times in chapter 7—in v.6 and v.19—the Lord reminds Israel that stepping outside of the ways of the covenant will lead to harm: “*Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?*” says the Lord. God's law is his covenant guide. Designed not only to protect his people from harm but to bless them to the fullest extent possible. That's what God wants to give through his covenant. He said in v.23,

*Jer 5:23 but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. <sup>24</sup> But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. <sup>25</sup> From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets.*

We often forget, like Judah and Israel of old, that God wants to bless us and that blessing flows from living life his way. That's covenantal living.

He's saying that if we choose to follow him and keep this first commandment, we'll find that he's going to be with us through everything and help us with grace to endure whatever comes our way. Israel at the time of Jeremiah was comforting herself with having the temple. God says to them. That's not your comfort. Going to the temple is not what my covenant is about. My covenant is about having a relationship with me personally. Walking with me in the details of your life, not just paying lip service to me when you come to the temple.

And that's what we have through Jesus. A covenant making and keeping God who makes the first critical move to save us because we can't do it ourselves. Through Jesus, we have a personal relationship restored with God. We have God living in us. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He's always there to lead and guide us in the path of righteousness. This is part of the revelation of God that we get through the

first commandment. He's jealous for us, for our salvation and our well-being, both in this life and for the life to come.

## **Confrontation**

As the first commandment reveals God's love for us, it also confronts us with our sinful selves. Israel thinks that God is only God of their worship life. The temple is only where God cares about anything. Remember what we read. Listen to these parts of vv.3-11 again:

*Jer 7:3 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" ...*

*<sup>9</sup> "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, <sup>d</sup> burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.*

Do you see how God sees his people in those verses. The temple is like their "stay-on-God's-good-side" card. We have to keep God happy by going to his temple. That's how pagans lived. Do a little of this and a little of that. Something to appease the god of bad weather. Something else to satisfy the god of fertility so they'd get good crops and more children. This is how Judah, says God to Jeremiah, is treating him. They do their rituals at the temple but then they go off in the rest of their life and live like the devil. Rip off neighbours, mistreat the poor, the widow and the orphans. Even murder. In addition, they turn to other gods: burn incense to Baal and even sacrifice their children on altars to Baal. Their lives are inconsistent with the God they claim to worship at the temple.

In short, God's people forget that he's God of all of life. For that matter, all of life is religion. All of life is worship. God says to them, "You can't treat my house and my Name like a good luck charm. As long as we pay lip service to God and speak his Name, we're good. From there, we can live however we want.

God says, "Not under my watch!" All of life is my gift to you. In all of your life you represent my Name. It is my covenant promise and my desire to bless you in all of your life. But you're not living life my way—by the covenant—because you don't walk with me in the first place. You just go to the temple, perform some rituals and call it good. You see, God's concern in this chapter is that Israel's life as a whole distorts the true character of God. They misrepresent to the world who the Lord really is.

Congregation, allow this first commandment to keep God first in your life to confront you today. How are you saying that you put God first but not really living that out when it comes to your lifestyle and the choices you make outside of formal Sunday worship?

## **Instruction**

Consider then how this first commandment offers us instruction in putting God first in all of our life.

The problem with our hearts when it comes to idolatry is that we don't want God to be king of everything. Israel of old sought safety in the trappings of religious observances—things associated with the temple. Likewise, we might give God control of the part of our life that we relegate to religion: Sunday morning from 10am to noon, a church related meeting here and there and our personal and/or family devotion time. This is again like Judah in Jeremiah 7 appealing to their commitment to the temple. God gets the time when we are at the temple. The rest of life is mine!

You might ask if we do that? I think we do it more than we realize. We might be like Jeannie who I referenced earlier. Remember? She confesses in her struggles that "Almighty God, King of the Universe, was right there in the room with me.... And if I'm honest, He didn't even cross my mind...."

Given that it's our Labour Day weekend, do you see how we might do this in our jobs when we simply work for the paycheque, rather than to glorify God with the gifts he's given us? Our paycheque becomes our idol. However, God wants us to view our work as a place to use our gifts to serve him and others, not ourselves first of all. Our job can easily become a means to enrich ourselves and take care of ourselves without regard for the Lord. That's idolatry.

You see, as Christians we pray and ask God to provide for our daily bread. That's his business. And if we trust him as we enter the workplace, that changes why we work and how we treat those around us. We head off to work and say, "Lord, my daily bread is your business. You're my provider. So what do you have in mind for me to do here at work today? How can I serve you here? How can I better do my job in a way that honours you and brings you glory? Is there something I'm not seeing? A way to improve my performance? A way to help the company? A way to better serve my customers? Someone I'm overlooking?" We ask, "Do I think too highly of myself? Do I think that I'm irreplaceable? Does that affect how I look at other people—perhaps with disdain?"

These are just some of the ways we might be looking to idols at work: to the paycheque as a means of taking care of myself; to myself as being greater than others, rather than a servant of the Lord; to acting like my skills and what I bring to the table at work are all of my own making and not gifts from God to freely share for the good of others.

Allow this first commandment to keep God first in your life to instruct you today. How are you saying that you put God first but not really living that out when it comes to the rest of your life? Going to church and giving God worship is good. It's very important. But he must be Lord of all of our life. As the Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:1:

*Rom 12:1 In view of God's mercy, offer your whole life as a living sacrifice to God. This is your act of spiritual worship.*

We need to heed God's instructions as his covenant people. And we do that because he's already made us secure in Christ.

## Promise

That brings us to our final point. What's the promise associated with the first commandment. In a word, it's blessing. But that always needs to be qualified because when we hear "blessing", we often think that God will give us everything we want. But that's not it. It's better to see it as God giving us himself!

This is what covenant is all about. God saying, "I'll be your God and you'll be my people." It's a relationship with him. We recognize that he is God alone. He is the God of grace who comes to rescue us from sin and offers us a life with him. In return, he says, "Don't treat me like the pagans treat their idols, trying to appease and please them in order to get things to protect themselves. I'm telling you that I have you in my hands. Your life is secure in me because of Jesus. I am, and always will be, with you."

God isn't promising you and me no problems: In fact, he says he'll use those to do good things in our life, more than we'll ever realize. Above all, he's promising you eternal security. That's his work and it's accomplished through Christ.

In Christ, dear friends, our one true God promises us grace for living every day—in every part of our life—for him. When we think that just doing certain things like coming to church on Sunday is all the first commandment asks of us, we're mistaken. Having God first is not just appeasing him with an offering of some kind at church. That's pagan worship. Rather, truly putting God first means knowing that he's already taken down the wall of division between us and him. He covenanted to do it and he's fulfilled that promise in Christ. Jesus has given us unity with God that nothing we do can ever accomplish. Jesus paid it all. That's the promise of God that motivates us to put him first and keep him first.

Now, he also promises and gives us the Holy Spirit to help us worship him with our whole life. God told Jeremiah that his people were following the inclinations of their evil hearts (v.24) and God called that living backwards. Instead, he urges the people to go forward. And forward means putting God first in everything. That's where the blessings of God come in this world. Blessings come in laying down our whole life for Jesus out of gratitude for all he's done for us. We are eternally secure and so we offer our lives to him. Our whole life. We take up whatever cross we bear in this life and follow Jesus. In our workplace, in our homes, in sports, in school. Everywhere. We recognize his promise to never leave us or forsake us and his promises to provide for us in his way and time. The Holy Spirit empowers us to turn away from creating God in our image, getting God to do what we want. Instead, he helps us to move forward God's way, keeping God first and letting it show in how we treat others. Find life where it truly is, congregation: in doing what God wants. That's how we put God first. In all of our life!

That'll mean holding on to God's promises regarding prayer. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we must ask the Holy Spirit to really help us live that out. Trusting him means we can stop worrying about earning more to secure ourselves and, instead, simply seek to do our work to the glory and honour of God.

I talked to a young man recently who shared how he was working hard and too focused on money. Trying to save every cent possible. Trying to earn more and pay down the mortgage. Watching the interest rate fluctuations daily and fixating on what that meant for him. Finally, he listened to the Spirit convicting him to rest in the Lord's care. So he did. And the more he let go of trusting himself, the more his anxiety subsided. He could trust the Lord's provision for him and enjoy life in God's care, instead of fighting so hard to care for himself.

Friends, we all must wrestle with this first commandment. God loves us so much and wants to free us from living by the designs of our world which are life-sucking. Instead, he invites us to rest in him and let our whole life be an offering of praise to his holy name! That's how we move forward with him. May we all seek that life more and more and enjoy the Lord's presence and promises for us to the fullest.

Amen.