

SHINE

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Intro

Throughout scripture there is a theme that continues to come to the surface: believe in God, and you will be blessed.

The inverse is also true, reject God and you will be cursed.

This morning's passage is a wonderful illustration of those promises.

The thing is, in a culture like ours, this sort of dualistic promise is so easily viewed in ways that make us question its validity. The world that we see screams out, 'Look, let's be honest: it's you against the other guy. Get as much as you can today. If you don't, not only won't you get it, but you're bound to get left behind and we all know that no one wants to be the one left behind.'

In this vein, there are so many of us who live as if everything is a commodity that can be used or disposed of as we desire. Things. People. It doesn't matter. We use something or someone as long as they are useful or convenient to us, but when that is no longer the case...see you later...or not.

What makes matters worse is that there are a whole lot of individuals who live this way who seem to be living what is considered to be a great life. It may sound awful this is also a way that too many of us live, at the very least, portions of our lives as well.

It is for this reason when we hear a passage that talks about blessing for those who follow God, and cursing for those who do not, those who view themselves as God followers tend to think, 'wow, what happened here? This doesn't look like the world I know.'

Correspondingly, those who haven't lived a Godly life (who look at their life and see something that feels 'comfortable') look at the passage and think, 'anybody who follows that line of thought is fooling themselves'.

This morning, I hope to allow us to look at these sorts of passages with new eyes, eyes that allow us to see that the blessings that are spoken of are not as temporal as we may want. The scripture reads this way.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is in the LORD.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It

shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

¹⁰I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

“Shine”

Light is a tricky thing. Anyone who has ever taken a swing at home design knows that this is the case. We choose paint colors and blinds with the express thought of brightening a room, or as the case may be darkening in (I have felt this as we figured out paint for the parsonage and have felt it again as Jen has talked with Mandy and Eric about the color on their walls). And once you get past the color on the walls, there are how the lamps are positioned so that we have enough light, without having too much, and mirrors, pictures, and artwork are hung in places where they will be accentuated, and not lost or bleached out.

If you can't hop on board with that example, then you know that dealing with light can be a tricky thing in terms of how we look. The make-up industry has found countless numbers of ways to get us to think that if we use this or that product we will be perfectly prepared to head out and face the world, because skin that was once too shinny, or not shinny enough, has now become “perfect”.

Of course, those same marketers never want to tell that what is perfect one day, can become cliché the next. However, what is absolutely true is that in using any of these products we are trying to control how the light will make us look.

I mean even car enthusiasts want to control the light. One of the great thrills of any car show (there was one down in Philly just a week ago) is looking at how well the vehicles reflect the light. If this wasn't the case, then all of those polishes that guarantee “the greatest of shines” would not be out there for us to consume.

The presence or absence of the light is a great way to make sense of our passage this morning. Again, as we talked about in the passage, as soon as the verbiage of blessing and cursing shows up, we immediately begin to think in terms of things: someone who has a lot of stuff must be blessed, and someone who has nothing must be cursed.

But as well know this sort of formula doesn't necessarily hold true. We all either know or have heard of ‘bad’ people who by the world's standards are blessed; and also ‘good’ people who by those same standards must be cursed.

However, that isn't what our passage says in relation to God. We heard there that the cursed will, “be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes.” And that the blessed will, “be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.” These designations are determined by whether or not a person is following God and bringing God with them into their life. With this in place, we clearly need to stop using stuff as the barometer of blessing verses cursing.

This is where light comes in.

One of the ways that the Almighty is described is as light. Isaiah 9 refers to the Son of God as a great light in this way: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”.

So if we're willing to buy into God being light, then that must also mean that to be without God is to be lacking in light? One of the ways that hell has been described by authors and philosophers throughout the ages is as a place of darkness. To be in the light is to be blessed with God's presence. To be in the dark is to be cursed because you are not in the presence of the Almighty. Which, I believe means that we need to change our thinking in terms of the whole blessed/cursed equation to realize that what the world views as riches, are actually but a façade.

As we all know, there are all sorts of ways of creating artificial light, light that makes the outside look good. What we need to remember and focus on is that the important kind of light, the light that we should always be striving to exhibit, is the light that comes from inside. This is the light of God. That is the blessing of God.

A few weeks back, I listened to a news program that documented how two different families were dealing with financial hardship.

What made it interesting was just how drastically different the two families approached that same difficulty. One family focused on the external; the other internal.

The first story was about a family of four that looked like they were living the good life. They had a beautiful home, a couple of vacation homes, nice cars, and were able to head off on rather lavish vacations seemingly whenever they wanted. That was the life that this husband and wife portrayed to their world, and to their two daughters. On the outside, their world was shining brightly.

However, when you went inside their home, what you realized was that the light on the outside was merely a pretense for what was really going on. This couple was so far in credit card debt that they were within a month or two of having everything that they had repossessed. They had been building up to that point for years, buying things that they couldn't afford, only worrying about themselves.

The reason that I make this last comment is because when the interviewer asked them if they regretted going on four expensive vacations within the past nine months (which put them into debt an additional 10 to 15 thousand dollars), they said, 'No, they wouldn't trade that time for the world.'

As I listened to that comment, I thought to myself, 'what sort of an example are they setting for their kids? Basically, if you like it, do it. If you want it, get it. How selfish.' In their actions they declared that they didn't care what the debt they were incurring would do to them, or their kids.

They were miserable because of the financial pressure that they had placed upon themselves,...and they just kept spending. Even when a financial planner gave them the hard facts of what they would have to sacrifice if they were going to pull out of this dive-bomb (which included selling off their residence in addition to their two vacation homes), they balked, saying

that such sacrifices “were too great a cost.” They put a spotlight on the outside of their lives. That was the sort of life that they were interested in creating.

The corresponding story was about a family where the father was legally blind, the mother was out on disability from a teaching position at a small charter school and the bills were, again, starting to pile up, even as the house that they lived in was falling down around them. The city they lived in was actually threatening to condemn the property, which would then put the mom and dad, and their three kids out on the street.

However, as you heard their story what you began to realize was that these individuals were not worried about the sort of light that was shined on their life from the outside. They went out and gave of their time so that other people were benefited in their need. As they struggled from month to month they stayed firmly together knowing that the God who had blessed them in so many ways would not depart them now. They never wavered. They were worried, but their faith for the future was in the very hand of the God of all creation. The light that they were worried about fostering was one that came from the inside. They weren’t worried about what the world thought of them. Instead they wanted God to be seen through their actions.

Despite what we have taught ourselves through the world, life is not about the light that we shine on the outside. All that is, is trying to put on a show so that people will ‘like’ you because of what they see around you.

That isn’t what life’s about.

Instead we need to focus on allowing a light to shine from inside our lives. This light is the light of God and by allowing it to shine through our thoughts, words, and deeds, not only will the world be blessed but we in turn will also be blessed, not necessarily in material things, but in ways that are so much more lasting, in ways that will allow us to be lifted up, in ways that will never go out of fashion, in ways that will never let us down.

Back to the two families: the first couple, the couple that was worried about having a light shined on the outside part of their life, finally did what the financial advisor recommended to them. They sold their assets, sometimes at a loss, in order to get back to even. Where they go from here was not revealed. The second family did have their home torn down, but in its place was a modest home that was, in large part, paid for by the members of the surrounding community who had been cared for, in some way, by the family that did their best to allow God’s light to shine through them.

In their case, they were blessed in what the world would consider a tangible way.

However, that wasn’t why they were living that way. They were allowing the light of God to shine through them because it built them up as a family, as a part of the community, as children of the living God. The couple that just had the light on the outside had none of these things. They were focused on the wrong things.

So now the question becomes, where does your light shine? Is it only on the outside? Or is the light that comes from inside more important?

Let the light of God shine from the inside, for as you do, you, and the world around you, will be blessed...and so will you!

After Sermon Prayer

God, You have promised that those who walk in Your light will be blessed. God, work in and through us so that not only do we walk in Your light, but we allow Your light to shine through everything we do, through everything we are. God, help us to see what a blessing it is to follow You! In Jesus' name. Amen.