
Know God by His Grace, Not Your Merit (Jer.31:31-34)
3/18/2018 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



It's hard to imagine. Jeremiah the prophet preached to an absolutely devastated group of people. The Israelites were God's people; God's special nation. For centuries they had worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem and lived in the promised land. Then, one day, some foreign army, the Babylonians, marched right into their homeland and destroyed the place. The temple, that symbol of God's presence with his people: gone! Many of the Jews were uprooted from their homes and forced to move far away to live in strange places and among strange peoples. Everything they had known was gone; all their hopes and dreams, shattered. They had to learn new customs, new ways to make a living, everything was different. Many of the people probably struggled with simply which way was up and which way was down!

It's hard enough to figure out your life after losing just one loved one, but for these people they lost almost everyone they had ever known, either because they died or because they moved away from them and would never see them again! It was chaos; absolute chaos for these people. They no longer understood where they came from, where they were, or where they were going.

The book of Jeremiah was God's word to these people living in utter chaos. God, through his prophet Jeremiah, was giving his people a solid foundation on which they could rebuild their lives. God was giving his people somewhere solid to stand so they didn't just get swept away in the chaos. As God reveals this foundation to the Israelites, we too are blessed with that same foundation for our lives. In these words, God teaches us to Know Him through His Grace, Not our Merit.

Jeremiah began this foundation with a very hard truth: the breaking of the old covenant. As God had brought his people out of Egypt, through the desert, and into the promised land, God established a covenant with the Israelites. He gave them laws for how they were to live and worship. The government that God set up for his people was a Theocracy. They didn't have a king or president. Instead, God himself was their leader.

In this Theocracy, where God himself was governing the people through his laws, God established this old covenant, which Jeremiah speaks about. This old covenant was a government relationship, or you could even say a business

relationship between God and the people. It was two-sided. Governments don't necessarily care who their people are, what they do care about is whether or not you are obedient to the government's laws. Same in business, right? In many business deals, neither side cares who the other is, they only care that the other person upholds their side of the bargain.

So was the old covenant. If the people obeyed God's laws, he promised them incredible blessings. If the people disobeyed, however, God promised devastating punishments. The important thing in this relationship was that the people kept their end of the deal.

Well, the Israelites failed to do that. God tells us they broke his covenant. Even though God didn't have a strictly business relationship with his people; he says that he was instead a husband to them, but they still broke that covenant. They were not obedient to God's laws.

This was the first part of the foundation God was giving his devastated people. Again, it's a harsh truth, but it's a needed truth. The devastation they were enduring was their own fault. But that's something solid! It was not random. It was because of their sins and it was what they deserved. God was giving his people the reason for what they had suffered and were suffering, and that allowed them to make some sense of what was happening, hard as it was to hear. But it gave the people a way to understand what had happened in the past as well as a hope of avoiding such devastation in the future!

Many people today still want this business relationship with God. They want to think that if they can just be good enough, then God will make everything smooth for them. That doesn't work. Why? Because of our sin. Whatever part God would give us for our side of the bargain, we would never be able to uphold our end. Our sin makes us want to disobey God at every point. Whenever he draws a line in the sand, our sinful nature yearns to step over it. Look at your own life. Just count up how many different things, just in your own mind, that you regularly do which you know you shouldn't. How many things do you regularly fail to do which you know you should do? We too would break that covenant.

Since God's people broke that covenant, God promised us a new covenant. Now, many of the people in Jeremiah's day might have said, "Yeah, but we broke

the other one! What's going to stop us from breaking this next covenant too!?" God answers that this will be a one-sided covenant. This is not a business relationship with God. This is not about you doing your part. Instead, the new covenant is God's promise to us.

In those last beautiful words of verse 34, God says that this covenant will be founded on him forgiving our wickedness and him remembering our sins no more. How can God just forgive our sins? The Israelites had been devastated because that's what their sins deserved! All sins deserve death!

Well, where else do you remember hearing about the "new covenant"? When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he says, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins!" Jesus continues, "Do this in remembrance of me." The forgiveness that God promised in this new covenant has been accomplished in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We remember that each time that we share the Lord's Supper together. Jesus has died. He has paid the penalty for our sins. And so, he has accomplished the new covenant for us!

Our relationship with God is no longer a business deal. Instead, like a spouse who promises to love and cherish their spouse without any mention of the other doing their part, so our God promises and does love us in Christ regardless of our sins and failures. Like a mother loves her children for no other reason than they are her children, even more so does our God choose to love us for no other reason than the fact that he has made us his children through Jesus' sacrifice. In Christ, God loves us. He cares about who we are. He cares about our relationship with him. Our failures to do our part, our sins do not change how God views us through Christ.

Under this new covenant, in this new relationship with God, which he accomplished in Jesus, God grants us his Holy Spirit. When God says here that he will put his law in their minds, the word for law there is *Torah*. *Torah* is the Hebrew word for the books of Moses, the first 5 books of the Bible. God is not merely putting his *law* in our minds and writing *that* on our hearts, he is putting his *teachings* in us through the Holy Spirit. He reveals who he truly is through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!

This is what God means when he says all of them from least to greatest will

know the Lord. Under the new covenant, we know God, not through our merits, because our actions will only ever deserve punishment. By our merits, we can only ever know God as a disappointed business partner or a condemning judge. Instead, by the new covenant, we know God through his grace to us shown fully in Christ.

As God's people by the new covenant, we are freed from that business relationship with God. We have no more fear of God's punishment for our sins. We have no fear of God's rejection when he sees what we would rather hide from him. We do not need to fear failing to hold up our side of the bargain. Instead, we are free to love God like a spouse loves their self-sacrificing spouse or a child loves their caring mother. In fact, we have even greater confidence in that relationship with God!

Relationships between loved ones aren't always what they should be. How easily do we treat our loved ones as if our relationship with them was merely a business deal? We naturally treat people the way they treat us. It's easy to give up on a relationship when someone else has let us down. Now, it's good for us to hold people to some standards, but do we make *that* the whole basis for our relationship with them? If McDonald's gives me a bad burger, I'll go to a different restaurant. But if my child doesn't clean his room, am I gonna throw him out and try to find a different child? No. If a loved one fails us, does that mean that we are now free to hate them? Thanks be to God that he does not treat us according to what we deserve. May we learn to be like Christ by not treating others according to what they deserve.

God gave his devastated people a solid foundation for their lives by teaching them to know him through his grace and not through their merit. That is our foundation too. Our relationship with God is not a two-sided matter of God doing his part and us doing our part. It is a one-sided promise to us from God. It is a matter of his undeserved love for us fulfilled in Jesus. Therefore, we do know God, not through our merit, but through his grace. Amen.