

## Practical Advice

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, September 5, 2010)

Jeremiah 2:4-13 (TEV) <sup>4</sup>Listen to the LORD's message, you descendants of Jacob, you tribes of Israel.

<sup>5</sup>The LORD says: "What accusation did your ancestors bring against me?

What made them turn away from me?

They worshiped worthless idols and became worthless themselves.

<sup>6</sup> They did not care about me, even though I rescued them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness: a land of deserts and sand pits, a dry and dangerous land where no one lives and no one will even travel.

<sup>7</sup> I brought them into a fertile land, to enjoy its harvests and its other good things.

But instead they ruined my land; they defiled the country I had given them.

<sup>8</sup> The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?' My own priests did not know me.

The rulers rebelled against me; the prophets spoke in the name of Baal and worshiped useless idols.

<sup>9</sup> "And so I, the LORD, will state my case against my people again. I will bring charges against their descendants.

<sup>10</sup> Go west to the island of Cyprus, and send someone eastward to the land of Kedar.

You will see that nothing like this has ever happened before.

<sup>11</sup> No other nation has ever changed its gods, even though they were not real.

But my people have exchanged me, the God who has brought them honor, for gods that can do nothing for them.

<sup>12</sup> And so I command the sky to shake with horror, to be amazed and astonished,

<sup>13</sup> for my people have committed two sins: they have turned away from me, the spring of fresh water, and they have dug cisterns, cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 <sup>1</sup>Keep on loving one another as Christians. <sup>2</sup>Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup>Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are.

<sup>4</sup>Marriage is to be honored by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. God will judge those who are immoral and those who commit adultery.

<sup>5</sup>Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never leave you; I will never abandon you." <sup>6</sup>Let us be bold, then, and say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

<sup>7</sup>Remember your former leaders, who spoke God's message to you. Think back on how they lived and died, and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup>Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. <sup>15</sup>Let us, then, always offer praise to God as our sacrifice through Jesus, which is the offering presented by lips that confess him as Lord. <sup>16</sup>Do not forget to do good and to help one another, because these are the sacrifices that please God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 <sup>1</sup>One Sabbath Jesus went to eat a meal at the home of one of the leading Pharisees; and people were watching Jesus closely. <sup>7</sup>Jesus noticed how some of the guests were choosing the best places, so he told this parable to all of them: <sup>8</sup>"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place. It could happen that someone more important than you has been invited, <sup>9</sup>and your host, who invited both of you, would have to come and say to you, 'Let him have this place.' Then you would be embarrassed and have to sit in the lowest place. <sup>10</sup>Instead, when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that your host will come to you and say, 'Come on up, my friend, to a better place.' This will bring you honor in the presence of all the other guests. <sup>11</sup>For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

<sup>12</sup>Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors—for they will invite you back, and in this way you will be paid for what you did. <sup>13</sup>When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; <sup>14</sup>and you will be blessed, because they are not able to pay you back. God will repay you on the day the good people rise from death."

As Jesus watched the dinner guests all trying to get a seat of honor, he gave them a little practical advice. He told them, in essence, "Don't seat yourself at a higher position than you deserve." Or in other words, don't think of yourself as more important than others – it will only cause you embarrassment. Jesus used this incident to provide a good lesson, but it isn't as clear to us as it was to his listeners. We have very few modern experiences where designated seating defines importance. Wedding receptions might be one of the few exceptions, and I think we are all sensible enough not to go to a wedding reception and sit at the head table, unless we are part of the wedding

party. But Jesus was not just talking about etiquette at a banquet - his message is deeper. The real teaching is to be humble, to avoid the trap of self-importance. And it can be a trap – don't let yourself get caught in that trap.

In years past, before television and the press made the faces of famous people known to everyone, President Ulysses S. Grant was walking across the White House lawn to a special reception, when he and others were caught in a sudden shower. The president was carrying his own umbrella, and as a matter of common courtesy offered to share with another person who didn't have one. As they walked along, the president failed to introduce himself, but instead asked the other person for his opinion on issues of the day. Before long, the stranger remarked about the president himself, saying, I have never seen Grant, but I have always thought that he was a very much overrated man." "That's my view, also," said President Grant. Do you see how his humility helped him avoid a trap? Just a touch of arrogance would have led to a lot of embarrassment for both of them.

Pride certainly goes before the fall. We have many other sayings that warn against pride and self-importance, for example: The bigger the man's head, the easier it is to fill his shoes. Or here's one from Ben Franklin, "He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals." Jesus certainly cautioned against falling in love with ourselves, and against having too high an opinion of ourselves. But in our lesson Jesus adds a spiritual dimension to this practical advice. First, remember where he was – with Pharisees, who thought rather highly of themselves. Their inflated self-esteem was based on their meticulous religious observations, doing rituals, and surrounding themselves with the self-righteous, the pious and the important. Through this they thought of themselves as quite holy, holier than others, and quite important as well. Jesus' advice to invite the outcasts of society to their banquet may seem unusual, but it was a way for him to show those Pharisees how to be in ministry, in service, to those in need. Deeds of service and hospitality, acts of love and charity – we know that is part of how we should live. But when was the last time you did something nice for a stranger? When was the last time you went out of your way to do something nice or extend hospitality to anyone? If you have to think back to yesterday, or worse yet, farther back than yesterday, I would encourage you to pick up the pace a little on your acts of hospitality.

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews is on the same track and gives more specifics. **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.** Beautiful stories have been inspired by this verse, such as that wonderful story of the cobbler who heard God speak to him in a dream that Jesus was coming to visit that very day. You probably know the story, how he prepared for a visit from Jesus, then gave the food he had prepared to a beggar, his own coat to a homeless person, and even his last pair of shoes to a child, only to go to bed and lament that Jesus had not come to him that day as God had promised, and then to hear in a dream that Jesus had come, as a beggar, a homeless person and a child. I don't know if such stories actually happened or not, but they serve as beautiful illustrations of Hebrews 13:2. Verse 16 has not generated such beautiful stories, but the advice given is clear: "Do not forget to do good and to help one another, because these are the sacrifices that please God." Humble acts of service and hospitality are not just simple actions, but when done with an attitude of love, they become spiritual acts. I thought about offering a short list of such spiritual acts that can be done right around here at Peace Church and you can probably imagine the things I would put on my list: Sing in the choir, help with Sunday School or even join a Sunday School class. By the way, classes begin next Sunday with our combined Sunday School; have you thought about coming and hearing what all the classes are doing, and then joining one of the classes? That's what Rally Day is all about – come and see, and then become a part of a class. Or how about joining the Men's Fellowship, Women's Fellowship, a circle or Hands On - these all provide opportunities to get more involved. Every one of these activities give us times of fellowship where we build relationships, relationships that give us strength in times of need, because our fellowship is also a spiritual act. All of these activities can all be spiritual, if you let God's spirit lead you.

The prophet Jeremiah laments that the people fail to ask, "Where is God?" Jeremiah accuses the people of "building cracked cisterns that can hold no water, while God offers them water from the fountain of living water. I think this passage describes many people today. There are so many people who are yearning for greater spirituality. New religions are being introduced and gaining converts. People are looking for God, but they are looking in the wrong places. They fail to see God in their service to others. They fail to see God in the eyes of the hungry, the lonely, the discouraged, the weak, the frail, or where most easily overlooked, in the eyes of their friends and neighbors who are also looking for deeper relationships, for community. We know where to find God. We know God speaks to us through Scripture, through worship, through human relationships and through service. Do not seek God in the mystical, the stars, or in self-gratification. Seek God in your relationships with others and in deeds of service, in humble deeds of kindness, kindness that expects no repayment, that does not expect to be invited in return. For as it says in Hebrews, these are the sacrifices that are pleasing to God. Amen.