

In the English grammar that I remember, there is a frequent structure in the language called the “first conditional.” It involves using the word “if” at the beginning of a sentence followed by a present cause and a future result. So, “If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.” “If you play with matches, you will get burned.” Or “If your wife wants a new hat, life will be infinitely happier if she gets it!” ☺ This earthly life is in the first conditional. If you do something today - either something good or bad - your actions will eventually produce a consequence, for yourself, or your family, or others that you love; a consequence either good or bad according to your actions. It’s a rule of the universe; there is no escaping it.



Rembrandt's *Jeremiah Laments Jerusalem*

Jeremiah was the prophet *par-excellence* of Jerusalem just before the Babylonian Exile. His message was an indictment of a people who, although mightily blessed by the Lord, had nonetheless become corrupt. God had given the children of Israel everything: security, prosperity, dominance among the regional powers of the day, the status of a highly favored people among all the nations of the earth. You would think that a people who are so generously blessed would respond to such great blessing with an outpouring of gratitude and thanks to God. But that was clearly not what was happening in the nation of Israel. Because, their leaders have constructed a “company store,” institution where the poorest are exploited and oppressed, and “bought out” by the rich with cheap bribes of little value. Israel has forgotten how to worship God in sincerity and truth. These people have become obsessed with accumulating ever more wealth. Their social and political system does little to address the real needs of the poorest in society. Instead, these are people whose politicians buy the support of the poor through fraud. These are people who’ve

polluted their own food supply with trash and poison.<sup>1</sup> In short, these are people just like us.

“But beware,” Jeremiah says to the Children of Israel. “Remember, O Israel, we live in a universe of the first conditional. This is a world of cause and result, and your actions will eventually lead to an appropriate consequence. Judgment will come O Israel, Jeremiah says, and that day of judgment will be terrible to behold.”

But if Jeremiah speaks to the children of Israel in 600 BC, does he not also speak to us? Isn’t he putting us on notice as well? Perhaps the prophet is telling us that, “The extravagant celebrations in which you participate while your poor go to bed hungry will be turned into grieving. Your prideful songs extolling yourselves will eventually become your own funeral dirges. Your bodies will wither from your self-imposed abusive life styles of over indulgence. Your fine and costly clothes produced in sweatshops staffed by child laborers will one day be replaced by cheap rags. The sun itself will no longer shine in your polluted skies.

“Because your hormone-sickened chickens will finally come home to roost. The cancerous piper spewing poison into the water you drink and air you breath for the sake of extravagant corporate profits will eventually have to be paid. Your national debt grown to such monstrous proportions that not even your great-grandchildren can pay it off will have to be reimbursed. For this is a universe of the first conditional, where every action good or bad will eventually produce its consequence. This is a world of the first-conditional, and that is also the human condition. The broken condition. The sinful condition. And judgment is inevitable.” You see, it’s no wonder that every time a prophet speaks, somebody picks up a rock!

<sup>1</sup> The corruption of Israel is outlined most clearly in Jeremiah Chapters 5 and 7 (including mention of infanticide). Other specifics of the way the society of Israel had been corrupted by this point in history are detailed in Amos Chapter 4.

But, what if there were another condition with different rules? In Luke this morning, Jesus tells us the parable of the shrewd manager. In it, a certain property owner informs his steward that the owner is going away. But after a while, the master will return, and in that day the steward will be called to account for how he has managed the estate during the Master's absence. (See Lk.16:1-4) Here, the story takes a weird turn. Because this particular steward doesn't send out stern letters demanding repayment, or fill out warrants for subpoenas, or initiate law suits for payment, with interest plus pain and suffering. Instead, of executing that kind of earthly remedy, the shrewd manager does something that seems folly in our world of the human condition. He actually forgives a portion of the debt owed by the Master's debtors. To one, he forgives a fifth of the debt, to another he writes off fully half the debt owed the Master. (See Lk.16:5-7). Now using the logic of our conditional universe, these acts border on the fraudulent, even entering the realm of the criminal, giving away the master's wealth in such a manner. Yet when the Master returns to enact judgment, he actually commends the steward for using the Kingdom's wealth in this way. (See Lk.16:8) It all seems to make no sense at all, until we begin to see the real effect of the steward's acts of charity and forgiveness. Can you imagine the reaction of the debtors when they returned home that evening? Can you just envision sitting around the dinner table with these debtors, listening to them describe in wonder how a huge portion of their crushing burden of debt had been lifted off their shoulders, taken away forever? Can you begin to feel the stirring of gratitude and joy that must have warmed their hearts at that moment, how they must have talked in glowing - even loving terms about a steward and a Master who were willing to practice such amazing charity? And then you begin to see why the steward was commended by the Master.

Because, you see, the only thing the Master ever wanted through the employment of his property in the world, the only agenda this Master ever had was that his wealth be used among the people to create exactly this kind of joy, and wonder, and earnest gratitude for such amazing love. The only thing the Master has ever wanted is for his much-loved children to love him back. And that is how he demands that his resources in this world be used. So that love for Him might abound.

It's a strange kind of economics, most assuredly not of this conditional world. You and I have all made such a mess of things in one way or another. And the conditional regulations of this world require us to bear the burden of judgment for our offenses. That's just the way this world is put together. But you see, you and I serve a very different kind of master. And the only thing He wants to do is love us. And the only thing He asks from us is that we love Him back.

The reading from Jeremiah as the weeping prophet demonstrates the insatiable desire of God to be with His righteous children, and the tragedy of his grief at our faithlessness. We are all really the dishonest manager of Luke 16 as we seek to use resources that are the Master's for our own selfish goals, while He observes us from afar, hoping day after endless day that we will, like the psalmist, choose to love Him and each other more than we love ourselves, for the sake of His name and glory. (See Ps.79:9.13) Because to seek blessed union with The Lord and work for His interests and His Kingdom is the oft-repeated commission of Psalms.

So let me ask you: How are you using the wealth the Master had given into your hands? Understand well, for a certain number of heartbeats we have all been given this wealth, this talent, these abilities; they are all yours to employ freely as you choose – for a time. But, all of that wealth, and talent, and even time, it is all really the Master's property. In the end you too will be called to give an account of how you have used your treasure, and your time, and your life for the building of His Kingdom. That day, dear friends, is as sure to come as the sun is certain to rise tomorrow. And on that day when your stewardship is reckoned up, will the Master look you in the eye and say, "Well done, oh good and faithful servant"? (See Mt.25:21,23) Because the truth is, no one can decide what the Master will say to you on that day of days, no one else in all the universe can decide except you. So, tell me, what's it going to be?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+, 09-08-16