



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Jeremiah 2:4-13,**  
**Hebrews 13:1-8, Luke 14:7-14**  
**August 29, 2010**

I hope you believed and intended what you just sang three times, "Oh Lord, you have the words of life. Teach me your way," although it's hard. We find how difficult it is, these three prescribed readings for this day, one from Jeremiah, one from Hebrews, one from Luke. I tried to find the one that could produce the best sermon, the one that you'd really like and think, "Ah, that's a lovely sermon" but every one of them I found to be an exceedingly difficult text. In fact, Jeremiah is difficult; Hebrews is more difficult; Luke is exceedingly difficult. Perhaps Jeremiah paints a picture that is sad. Hebrews gives us some hope, and Luke finally introduces us to what could be wonderful.

We begin with Jeremiah. Jeremiah preaches a sermon. Jeremiah preaches in just a way that 2,600 years later we have a word in English, a Jeremiad. Imagine 2,600 years from now somebody referring to a Howellwood sermon. A Jeremiad – I looked it up in the dictionary – it means a bitter lament over the state of things. The prophet Jeremiah is very grouchy about things. But it's not that he's grouchy or in a bad mood, it's that God is grouchy. God looks out at God's people and God is grieved; God is like a jilted lover; God is like an abandoned parent; God is like a grieving friend. God has offered life to the people but they have been so very busy with so many other things they brushed away from God. Jeremiah puts it like this: "They have pursued what is worthless. They have exchanged their glory for that which does not profit," reminding me of what Paul wrote in Romans. *They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie.* They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, although I would suggest in our culture it's not so much that we have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. What we have exchanged the truth of God for is a word I wish I could say out loud but I just really can't in church, BS. I read a book by a philosopher at Princeton a couple of years ago. He wrote out the full word for BS. He says it's the dominant mode of communication in our world. It's just everywhere. We hear it from politicians; we hear it from advertisers; we hear it from people we know, that it's just BS. He says it is the essence of BS, the BSer is just going to try to talk you into whatever he wants you talk you into. Truth has just nothing to do with it. In our society we've got that in spades, don't we?

Jeremiah says this – this is a great question – *When has a nation done such a thing, to change its God for that which is not God?* I thought about that all week long. When has a nation ever done such a thing to exchange the true God for that which is not God? I will guarantee you that somewhere in America right now there is some preacher in some pulpit who is picking up on that phrase and talking about that mosque in New York City, and I know what the preacher is saying. The preacher is saying "This is a Christian nation but there is a..." You know what? If Christianity is feeling crowded out in America, there would be one and only one reason for this, and that would be because in the churches for a long time we have substituted for the real gospel a vapid, trivialized, self-indulgent form of Christianity that doesn't pass muster. We have gone after a version of Christianity that is bland and is squeezing us. I love this – back in the 1930s,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer got thrown in a concentration camp when he went home in Germany for being part of a plot to undue Hitler. Bonhoeffer was in New York City and he traveled to all the churches in New York and he heard some of America's great pulpитеers including Harry Emerson Fosdick. When he got back to Germany he said, "In America in the churches they talk about everything except Jesus Christ. They talk about everything except the cross. They talk about everything except sin and forgiveness. They talk about everything except life and death."

Glenn Beck – I turned on the TV yesterday and caught a little bit of Glenn Beck. I caught the moment when Glenn Beck said, "This is the day that America turns back to God." This is the day that America turns back to God. Now, I've got to be honest with you, Lisa and I were out and about last night – we were at a mall for a period of time and we were at a restaurant – we were just where there were a lot of people and it did not appear to me that America had quite yet turned back to God. Where we were, at least, people looked the way they looked the day before, and they looked the way they did last week and last year. They were out, they were crowding in to shop and they were going to nice places to eat – you know. Where we were there were some people across from us and – I don't care if somebody drinks at dinner – these people, their waiter had brought them too much at dinner – and they were getting a little bit loud. When is the day that America turns back to God and what would that look like?

You see, Jeremiah speaks to people and he says *You have exchanged your true God for that which is not God.*" He is speaking to people who were not holy and had no real intention of being holy. They wanted to keep living the way they had been living, thank you very much. He was talking to people who prayed but they only prayed when they had some deal that they were working on and they wanted God to help them with it. They were people who knew how to blame everybody else for their troubles but never said "Oh, Lord, I repent. Oh Lord, I have sinned. Oh, Lord, I have turned away from you."

Jeremiah – Jeremiah says that the people worshiped gods that were worthless. One of the worthless gods of our culture – we can think about this and one thing that seems pretty clear is that Archbishop William Temple was right. He said our society is as if some mischievous person has sneaked into a shop in the middle of the night and has switched all the price tags around and the things that are really valuable have really low prices, so we think "Oh that can't be worth much" and the things that are really cheap and of no value at all, they have high price tags and we think "Ohhh, that is so cool," and he says the tragedy of our life is that we spend ourselves on that which is relatively worthless. We wind up missing what truly has value. And it's just the truth about us. The fact is we are far – I hate to preach this sermon to you – this is my fourth time this morning. Everybody has had that kind of shell-shocked look – you know, like, "I wish James would come up with a nice, sweet sermon today," but I've got to say these things to you because sometimes I teach preaching and I tell preachers that if you're going to preach a hard word that's hard for people to hear, you've got to mix in some humor and some pleasant stories, like, get them going with you. But I started thinking about it this week and Jeremiah, as best we can tell, didn't do a little standup humor before he uttered God's prophecies. As best we can tell, when Jesus walked around he didn't do. you know, like some sweet little stories from home before he talked to the people. There are hard words from God. They are hard to hear. Aristotle said, "The opposite of a friend is a flatterer." I've not come to flatter you today, I've come to try to be your friend, and as a friend, one of the things that we just have to

acknowledge to one another is that we are very far from God. We're very far from God in all our business. If you want proof of this, go to the Hebrews passage. The Hebrews passage on the surface seems very very pleasant until you really pay attention to it because what does Hebrews say? Hebrews says the following: *If God has taken up residence in your life you will be free from the love of money.* If God has taken up residence in your life you will be free of the love of money. Hebrews says that if God has taken up residence in your life you will be content with what you have.

Now I watched last night – you could not find a parking place at the mall where I was trying to find a parking place. As best I could tell, the people streaming into the mall were not content with what they have. They wanted to go into the mall to buy some new bright shiny things. Although the fact is, they'll bring those new bright shiny things home and those won't satisfy them either. In no time they'll be back in the mall for newer brighter, shinier things. But Hebrews says that if God has taken up residence in your life you will be content with what you have. How far are we from God? Hebrews says that if God has taken up residence in your life you will not be afraid. You can confidently say "The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid." But we are totally driven by fear. Everything that we do has to do with anxiety and fear and striving for security. We are a fearful people, but Hebrews says that if God has taken up residence in your life you will not be afraid. Hebrews says this: That if God has taken up residence in your life, then marriage will be held in honor. I am sick to death of people who think that the way to hold marriage in honor is by trashing homosexuality. Excuse me, if marriage has been dishonored I think that should be laid at the feet of the heterosexuals, the married people who have shown very little to anybody about commitment and understanding about the treasuring of life and serving God together in values. Hebrews says if God has taken up residence we are content and freed from the love of money. We are not afraid. We know how to hold relationships in honor.

I don't know why we exchange the true God for false gods. It may be that we just get duped. You know, the devil doesn't pop out and tell you the truth. The devil pops out and lies to you. If the devil popped out and said "I'm going to ruin your life," you'd run for the exits as fast as you could. But instead, the devil comes out and says "I'm going to give you the moon if you just come over here. Everything is just going to be wonderful." We go ahhh, OK, we'll come. We get seduced by that which is alluring, but it's not really of God.

Sometimes I think we exchange the true God for the false gods because we just feel hollow inside and we think if we just pour something in there it'll fix the hollow place inside. It just nags at me. It bugs me. I'll buy something, I'll drink something, I feel lonely – I've got to be around somebody. We want some company, and the fact is, the fact is that that really is the secret. That really is the secret. You feel hollow and you're lonely. And what both Hebrews and Luke seem to suggest to us is that the solution to your problems, the way to find God is through hospitality, hospitality. We talk a lot about hospitality here and part of it's being nice to people who come to church and all this. Hospitality, let's just be very clear. Hospitality is not knowing when to serve the drinks to your guest when they come to your house or knowing when to write a thank-you note. It's not about manners. Hospitality is when we know how to welcome the stranger, and we're absolutely no good at this. How do we welcome the stranger? Albert Schweitzer said, "The first stranger that we fail to welcome is Jesus." He says "Jesus is the

stranger who comes" and he says "We shut him out and the reason that we shut him out is that we open the doors and we invite Jesus into our home. He comes in asking hard questions." We don't really like hard questions. We want Jesus just to come in and bless everything, just bless everything. But Jesus comes in asking very hard questions: "What have you been busy doing? What have you been about? Are you holy? Are you content?"

Jesus says this amazing thing in the gospel passage that John read – I hope you were paying attention to it – it's so difficult to hear. I think Jesus meant it to be easy to hear but we have made it so difficult to hear. Jesus says – and this is amazing to me – Jesus says "When you invite somebody over, don't invite those who can invite you back, but instead, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. And you and I – let's just be honest – we have absolutely no intention of following that Jesus. We have no intention. What do we think? Do we think that when Jesus said that, he was speaking symbolically? Was it a metaphor, some mystical symbolism, he didn't really mean for us to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind. I think Jesus meant it and I think Jesus thought of it as entirely doable. You see, the fact is, if you were serious about following Jesus – let's say you walked out of here today and you said Jesus said "Don't invite those who can invite you back, but invite the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind." If you got busy you could get that done by Thursday or Friday – you really could – I think you could. If you're struggling with that, call me Thursday morning. I will coach you a little on it. The fact is we're like those people that Jeremiah spoke to. We've got our own stuff going on and what we just have sadly to acknowledge to one another is we have exchanged the true God for a false god. Jesus has spoken to us and we just have shut him out and he's grieved. He feels like a jilted lover, like a parent whose children have wandered away and don't call home any more. We just haven't paid attention.

You know there's this business about caring for the poor. There's an ideology in this country that says we really shouldn't care for the poor. That's got to be very clear with you. You may think that if you'd like but it's not a Christian thought. This isn't about being conservative, Republican, liberal or any of that stuff. This is about being what Tony Campolo called a red-letter Christian. Tony Campolo says "We should be red-letter Christians." You know those old-timey Bibles that have the words of Jesus in red? If we're serious about the words of Jesus, then we go out and help the poor. This is simple, it is not arguable.

You know, when I was in Davidson, the Bishop or somebody sent down this missive that said "Churches shall develop a mission statement." And so I gathered a group of people together and I read the directions from the Bishop and there was a woman who said, "That's ridiculous. The mission of the church is easy." And we said, "What is it?" And she said, "We just do the stuff that Jesus said." So we wrote it down on the form and went home. We just do the stuff Jesus said. But the fact is, maybe we haven't bothered to find out what Jesus said because when we start looking, we discover that Jesus says things like, "When you invite somebody over, don't invite those who can invite you back but invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." So we just get busy with other things and we don't read our Bibles. We don't listen to God's word. The strange thing is that that's the reason we're not content. That's the reason we love money. That's the reason we're so fearful. That's the reason we're so hollow and lonely.

Anyway, what's at stake and why this matters – I hate to bring this up but it's the truth and this is the last thing and then I'll stop – it's this: What Jesus says at the end of that Luke 14 story, he says, "When you invite somebody, don't invite..." and he says that thing, and then what he says is, "You'll be repaid at the resurrection." Now I'm about to sound like an old-time backwoods country preacher, but here it comes. The fact is, every one of us in this room is going to die. There's none of us in this room who is going to live forever. If you think you are, see me after the service and we'll talk about this. You're going to die one day and what's going to happen when you die is you'll meet God and what are you going to have to say? What are you going to say to God? Are you going to say "Well, God, I had a great life; I had a good job and we lived in a pretty nice house and bought some nice things for the nice house; we had some great friends and when they came over we had a great time together and I bought some nice things and we just had a lot of fun. It was really good. I belonged to a church, too." That would be a little lame, won't it? Because Jesus would say, "Well, what about the being content part? I could have made you content. You missed that. I could have made you not love those things you were so attached to. I could have filled that hollow place. I could have given you such a better life, and you just need to know." Jesus will say this to you, "You just need to know you broke my heart day after day, after day. You just pretended I wasn't even there. You just acted as if my words didn't really matter. It made me so sad; I grieved over you; I wept over you day by day but you just never really paid attention." I don't know about you but when I come to that point I want to be able to say something different. I want to be able to say, "I didn't do it as perfectly as I would have liked, but I tried, Lord; I tried to listen to your words and to do them. I failed miserably but I was trying. I was a little more content. I got a little unattached from money. I didn't do all that I should but I really did try to welcome a stranger, did try to reach out to those that are in need. Everybody around me told me you weren't supposed to do that but you told me to do it; I tried to do it and it meant a lot, brought me a lot of joy. Thank you, oh Lord, for the life that you have given me."

God looks down this day and is surely grieved over the way we live, where our minds and hearts are, but I don't know. Maybe for at least some of us, this might be the day we turn back to God and decide to be holy, decide to pray, decide that God's agenda is going to be our agenda, maybe today. It's that day.