

### ***The New Deal***

In the name of him who makes all things new, dear friends in Christ: If you noticed today's sermon title, *The New Deal*, you might be worried that I'm planning to give you a lecture about a controversial cluster of economic policies that were enacted during the 1930s in the hope of helping our nation recover from the Great Depression and to prevent such a widespread financial crisis from ever happening again. If so, let me put your mind at ease. I'm not qualified to speak on the subject; and even if I were, this would not be the time or place for it.

No, what I'd like to direct your attention to is God's new deal, by which I mean the different way he deals with his people now in what we call the New Testament period as opposed to how he used to deal with his ancient people Israel in what we call the Old Testament period. You probably know that as a theologian, I tend to gravitate to the Old Testament. I like the richness and depth of the storylines and the way the Lord reveals himself and his will through them. That, and I figure the Old Testament was the Bible Jesus used – the New Testament hadn't been written yet – and if it was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for me. And while that's true, I'm still glad I live in New Testament times. There's no question that for God's people things are much better now.

But if I were to ask you what are the fundamental differences between the ways the Lord deals with his people in the Old and New Testament, how would you answer? I find there's often a lot of misunderstanding out there. One popular view is that in the Old Testament God is kind of mean and grouchy. He's always making unreasonable demands and then smiting those who disobey him. Then in the New Testament he decides to play nice. He all hugs and kisses – almost like he's apologizing for the way he was before. It seems to imply that the Lord made a mistake the first time around and then wised up. I don't think we want to go there. A slightly more sophisticated version of this view says that the Old Testament is mostly Law – that was God's method of dealing with people; but now in the New Testament he switched to the Gospel. It used to be "The soul that sins shall die", and now it's "Forgiveness for everybody". But tell that to King David whom God freely forgave of the sins of adultery and murder in the Old Testament, and to Ananias and Sapphira, a New Testament couple whom the Lord struck down dead for the high crime of lying about how much they gave to the church in their offering envelope, and you'll see that Law and Gospel are mixed throughout both Testaments.

The error present in both of these views is the notion that at some point the Lord changed his mind concerning how he would deal with people. That can't be because one of the essential attributes of God is his immutability, a fancy word that means he doesn't change. "I, the Lord, do not change", he states emphatically in the Scripture. And "Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever." There can be no change within God; and yet there is a difference in the way the Lord deals with his people in the Old and New Testaments. We know it's true – we're living in a much better time; but how can we describe that difference? How can we put our fingers on it?

The thing to see is that while there is a difference, there is also an essential continuity. It's not a complete change from one Testament to the other; the same ideas and themes are present in both. It's more like the Old Testament is a seed full of promise, which in the New Testament grows into a tree. It's the same species. It's got the same DNA. But the latter is a lot more spectacular. And if you're looking for a place to rest in the shade, the tree is going to

cast a much larger shadow than the acorn. Another way it's been described is to say that the New Testament is in the Old *concealed*, and the Old Testament is by the New *revealed*. That is to say, what the Old Testament presents in pictures, types, and shadows is unveiled and fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's through him that we truly come to see and to know the Lord.

This is what Jeremiah is talking about in today's Old Testament lesson. He prophesies of a day in the future when the Lord will give his people a new deal – a new covenant, which will be a vast improvement on the old one. That's the covenant God made with his people at Mount Sinai. And unfortunately a lot of people think of that covenant as all Law. It wasn't. Yes, it's true that God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai; but he gave his people a whole lot more there. In fact, most of the book of Exodus in which the Lord gives the Law is Gospel. The first 15 of 40 chapters describe how he saved his people from bondage in Egypt. It's the story of deliverance and salvation. The last 15 chapters describe the Tabernacle and its appointments, which is all about the provisions the Lord made to dwell in the midst of his people and forgive their sins. Of the remaining 10 chapters, only 3 can properly be described as Law in that they list the rules by which the Lord wants his people to live. The rest are mostly about the Lord feeding and caring for his people in the wilderness.

The point to stress is that the first covenant was indeed a covenant of grace. The Lord saved his people and led them on a journey to the land he promised to give them. They didn't deserve it. They didn't do anything to receive it. Truth is they fought and resisted the Lord most of the way. It was all God's doing. It was his work that saved them and eventually delivered them to the Promised Land. Yes, he gave them rules to live by; but then he does the same for us in our time. A good example of that is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It's 99% Law.

The Old covenant *was* a covenant of grace; but there are some important differences between it and the new deal we have now. One difference was what we might describe as the Lord's relative "approachability". In the Tabernacle and later in the Temple after it had been built, the Lord was truly present with his people. A visible manifestation of God's glory hovered above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. If you asked any Israelite where God was, he could point to the Temple and say, "He's in there. God is in the building." And make no mistake: they understood that God is everywhere; and yet they knew there was a special manifestation of his presence in the Temple. But you couldn't get to it – not directly anyway. No one could go in and stand before the Lord's presence. There were barriers in the way – barriers that represented the way that sin separates people from God. That's why the Lord designated priests who acted as go-betweens. The average person couldn't face the Lord directly. You had to go through someone else – someone the Lord chose to be a priest. And even among the priests there were ranks. Only the high priest, and then only on one day in the whole year, could go in and stand before the Lord and minister there on behalf of all the priests and people. So while they could truthfully say, "The Lord is with us", there was still some distance and tension there.

Another big difference was all the sacrifices that had to be offered. This was the primary way people worshipped under the old covenant. Standing before a priest who would place his hand on the head of the sacrificial lamb or goat you brought, you would confess your sins aloud. The idea was that your sins were being transferred to the animal. Then, while you held still the animal bearing your sin, the priest would reach down and slice its throat with a very sharp knife. He would collect its blood in a bowl. Meanwhile you'd be feeling the trembling animal bleeding away its life – for you. And you have to admit, it certainly would have reinforced in your mind the notion that the wages of sin is death. The blood would then be taken to the burning altar

that stood before the door of the Temple, and the priest would pour it out over the red hot coals sending up a sudden rush of smoke and steam. That was it. The priest would announce that your sins were taken away. Then you took your animal home, prepared it, and feasted on it – consuming the roasted flesh the animal that died for your sin.

It was these sacrifices that were being offered continuously, day after day, morning, noon, and night, which made it possible for the Holy God to dwell in the midst of sinners. He had to be constantly forgiving the people's sins through sacrifice. If he wasn't constantly forgiving them by means of the shed blood, his very presence would destroy them, for sinners cannot stand before God and live – even a God whose presence is located several barriers away and behind a thick curtain. And two things to point out about these sacrifices: first that the job was never done. I mean as soon as you confessed your sins over a lamb and it died for you, you started running up another account of new sins that had to be paid for. You'd have to come back in another month or two and do it all over again. It was an endless cycle.

The second thing to see is that it was still a covenant of pure grace. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that it was Law to have to bring sacrifices to the Lord all the time: "Oh, here we again; got to give the Lord another lamb to keep him happy." That misses the point entirely. The point is that you deserve to die for your sins, but that God in his mercy offered you a way to have your sins forgiven and for you to stay alive. God didn't need your sacrifice. *You* needed the sacrifice to escape God's righteous judgment. And the necessity of repeating the sacrifices again and again was meant to reinforce just how sinful you were and how gracious the Lord was in providing you this way to be forgiven of your sins.

These two elements together, then, were the foundation of the old covenant: the priests who acted as mediators between God and his people, and the sacrifices for sin that had to be offered over and over again. It's precisely these two things that are no longer necessary under the new covenant. Why? Is it because they've been done away with? No; rather they have been completely fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He now stands for us as our high priest. He can do that because he's a human just like the rest of us, and he's been chosen by God for the task. But because he is also the Lord, we have direct access to God through him. And Jesus is not only our perfect high priest, he is also the sacrifice of atonement who died for our sins. He's the priest who made an offering of himself on our behalf when he went to the cross and shed his innocent, precious blood for us. His blood redeems us from all sin. And because in Christ God died for sin, the whole price has been paid. No more sacrifices are necessary, for in his one sacrifice he took away the sins of the whole world.

This is the foundation of the new covenant in which we live. And as you can see, it's a hundred times better than the old covenant, which is why Jeremiah the prophet extols it as he does. It's a new deal for God's people. It means that we stand continuously before God in Christ without any barriers needed to protect us. It means the Lord can now come to us directly and even live within us without burning us up with his holiness. It means too, as the reading indicates, that the Lord can now write his Laws directly on our hearts.

He does this, we know, by means of his Spirit who accompanies the Word of God we hear. It's the Spirit who works holy faith in us – we who have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God – and thus made fit vessels in which God can dwell, and through which he can accomplish his works of mercy and love for the other people in our lives. With his Law written internally in our hearts rather than externally on tablets of stone, we are enabled to live, to think, and to do what the Law of God requires. More than that, because he dwells within, we actually know the Lord. He's not a distant deity looking down on us from the clouds. He's not a stranger

with whom we meet once a week when we gather here for divine service. No, he is in, with, and around us all the time. His presence is personal. It's intimate. It's all encompassing.

And this is why it's so much better for us now in our day under God's new deal. The Old Testament saints could only long for the age in which we live. And that's why we should be especially grateful for the new deal we enjoy, and show our gratitude mostly by taking full advantage of it. It's a wicked thing to be given a great gift and neglect or ignore it. This we must not do. Rather we should strive all the more to live in the new covenant, seeking to know the Lord and his gracious presence through the very means he now provides for us to increase our knowledge and love of him: his Word and Sacraments. That's where we encounter Jesus. That's how he comes to us. That's how we learn to know him directly.

So let's do that. And as we do, we look forward to yet another New Deal. Just as the Lord told Jeremiah a better day was coming, so he tells us that we too can look forward to a time when everything will be vastly improved. Then we will know the Lord even as we are known by him, and the Lord's forgiveness will no longer be necessary, for then sin and death will be for us but distant memories. This is the New Deal Christ has promised us, and he will bring it to pass even as he did the New Deal he promised Jeremiah. His Word is certain. Therefore we can be sure; through Jesus Christ our Lord who makes all things new. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***