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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“RETURN TO ME”
Jeremiah 3:1, 12-18; 4:1-4

Is God’s love conditional or unconditional? Must we live up to a certain standard or meet certain requirements for God to love us? A lot of us are wrestling with that question. Maybe what we are really asking is: *does Holy God still love me despite my transgressions?*

→ The answer is an unequivocal “Yes”: the LORD loves you no matter what. His love is unrestricted. {Ro 5:8, NRSV} **“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners”** – when our minds were still {Ro 8:7, NRSV} **“set on the flesh,” “hostile to God”** and incapable either of submitting **“to God’s law”** or pleasing him – **“Christ died for us”!** There is no mistake so stupid, no sin so terrible that it can overcome God’s love.

■ Please turn to Jeremiah. Speaking to the people of Judah through his prophet in 3:1a, Holy God says:

**“If a man divorces his wife
and she leaves him and marries another man,
should he return to her again?
Would not the land be completely defiled?”**

▪ He is referring to his commandment in Deut. 24:1-4, which forbids a man from remarrying his ex-wife if she has married a different man after their divorce. To do so would **“bring sin upon the land”** that he has given Israel **“as an inheritance.”**

⊛ (There is one of the principal themes of Jeremiah: the land, and the subtheme of land as witness to the Creator’s goodness and human stewardship.)

This might sound unreasonably strict. However, its purpose was to compel a husband to carefully weigh the consequences and not rush into a divorce. Given the harsh reality that the ex-wife suffers far worse social and economic fallout than her ex-husband, it is to a woman’s benefit for her man to give this statute serious consideration.

⊙ Back to Jeremiah 3:1: the Almighty speaks as if he were a husband and Judah his wife. Only, in sharp contrast to the human situation, it is the wife (Judah) who has abandoned her husband (YHWH) in favor of another partner (a false god).

⊛ God compares their spiritual bond with marriage, which he designed to be the most intimate, unifying, fruitful and resilient human relationship. This also is a principal theme in Jeremiah: the marital nature of a covenant relationship with God.

■ Jeremiah 3:1b:

**“But you have lived as a prostitute with
many lovers –
would you now return to me?
declares the LORD.”**

▪ The penalty for divorce is that a couple cannot remarry each other if she has had another husband. Yet YHWH has never filed papers; Judah has dumped God for someone else without the benefit of a divorce.

That is called adultery – and the penalty for adultery is death. Leviticus 20:10: **“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife...both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”**

- It gets worse! Judah has not limited herself to one lover; she has sold her soul to any idol who promises the good life, any nation who promises protection. Recall 2:18: **“Why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor? Why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?”**

- ⊗ A word of caution: we must not equate a spiritual prostitute with flesh-and-blood victims of the sex industry. The vast majority of them are coerced or manipulated into it. I suspect that the few who claim to have chosen it are so compromised by addiction or personal brokenness that their so-called “freedom” is an illusion.

- That is not Judah’s story. She is cheating of her own free will. To borrow a different metaphor from Jeremiah 2:13, God’s people have not left him because his pure, fresh-flowing, crystal clear **“living water”** has dried up; it has not. **“They have forsaken him”** because they have acquired a taste for stagnant, visibly dirty, contaminant-laden seepage and run-off that collects in cisterns they have dug for themselves.

- For him to welcome Judah back would defile the land, violate the torah, and defy common sense. And so the words of verse 12 come as a shock:

**“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD,
“I will frown on you no longer,
For I am merciful,” declares the LORD,
“I will not be angry forever.”**

{Brueggemann} God **“yearns for the return of Judah to the covenant. This yearning... violates the torah,”** which he established, **“yet [his] great love for Israel is sufficient to risk”** it. How many husbands would make themselves so vulnerable? How many would set aside all their rights on the slim chance that their wife might stay home this time? How many would risk humiliation? The Almighty does!

- ⊗ The answer to our opening question could not be more obvious: Holy God will always love us regardless of our transgressions.

- ⊗ This, too, is a principal theme in Jeremiah: the invincible love of God.

This is good news worth celebrating, is it not?!

There is a second question that ensues from the first: what about *a relationship with God? Is that conditional or unconditional? Are there prerequisites for a personal, constructive relationship with the LORD?*

This is equally important as the question of love, yet many never wrestle with *it*. Perhaps they assume that since God’s *love* is unconditional, a *positive relationship* with him is also unconditional. But what if they are wrong?

- Let’s look at Jeremiah 3:13:

**“Only acknowledge your guilt –
you have rebelled against the LORD
your God,
you have scattered your favors to foreign
gods**

**under every spreading tree,
and have not obeyed me,”
declares the LORD.**

As intensely as God yearns for a renewed relationship his invitation is not unconditional. He lists three conditions.

★ Condition ① is the admission of guilt: not the vagueness of, “I apologize for whatever I might have done wrong”; not the deflection of, “The devil made me do it”; not the self-justification of “I’m sorry that you feel that way” – an honest confession of specific sin.

■ Moving on to Jeremiah 4:1-2:

**“If you will return, O Israel, return to me,”
declares the LORD.**

**“If you put away your detestable idols out of
my sight
and no longer go astray,
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD
lives’...**

★ Condition ② is a transformed life (characterized by religious reform and ethical relationships of justice and mercy). Judah must destroy her idols and repudiate her pagan rituals, walk in truth and righteousness, and declare in word and by deed that the God of Israel is the only living God.

■ And Jeremiah 4:3-4a {NIV/NRSV}:

“Break up your unplowed ground

**and do not sow among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
circumcise your hearts.”**

★ Condition ③ is a reoriented heart & mind (marked by tenderness, purity, radical devotion to God). Their whole inner being must {Ro 12:2} **“be transformed by the renewing of [the] mind.”**

⊗ These conditions confirm the **principal theme we noted 2 Sundays ago: human responsibility.**

⊕ The answer to our 2nd question is clear: **God does not offer personal relationship without condition.**

Some will bristle at this: ‘What kind of double-talk is this? Real love always takes the beloved back, no matter what!’ But does it?

☑ Your teenager (it could be a boy, but let’s say she is a girl named Jane falls in with a bad crowd and starts cutting classes and getting drunk on the weekends. She quickly graduates to pot, then to meth or heroin.

One day Jane disappears. Weeks later she shows up at your door. She feels so sorry! Can she come home? Naturally you say “Yes.”

A few days later Jane is gone. When you see her again she is cold and hungry and says she is ready to change. Can she come home? You are so desperate that you would say “Yes” no matter what.

This time Jane steals cash, an I.D. and a credit card when she leaves. Months pass before she returns, looking for money and a place to sleep.

Your daughter will do anything to win back your trust – *and* she will do anything to feed the insatiable hunger of her addiction. Jane is a master manipulator, an artist of deception. She lies, cheats, steals, and sells her body. Under the right conditions she might be willing to kill for the drug. She is slowly killing herself for it right now.

You will never stop loving Jane! But what if the comforts of home make it too easy for her not to change? What if the room and board you give, or the money she steals helps her to buy drugs?

In that case, it is not in Jane's best interest for you to say "Yes." It is more loving to require short-term detoxification, a long-term recovery program, and whatever else it takes to rebuild her life and a constructive relationship with her family.

Of course, if Jane does meet your beneficial conditions you will welcome her back with tears of joy and open arms and receptive hearts.

■ Similarly, in Jeremiah 3:14-18 YHWH promises to renew his covenant relationship with his people if they will really return.

If they admit their guilt, seek transformation, and reorient their hearts and minds they will be able to receive the fullness of God's love. He will bless them with security, meaning, and ultimate satisfaction. Verse 16, He will be so real to them, their intimacy with him so constant and rewarding that they won't miss the ark of the covenant which is now the symbol of God's presence among them, but which is either going to be destroyed or stolen by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

"They will no longer follow...their evil hearts," verse 17. Everyone who is *supposed* to come home *will* come home, verse 18. That will even include foreigners, outsiders, strangers who have never before drunk from {2:13} **"the spring of living water"**: Jeremiah 3:17, **"all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD,"** and Jeremiah 4:2, **"then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory."**

Brothers and sisters, today's Scripture was not written *to* us, but it was written *for* us.

God loves us. Period.

God yearns for a deeply intimate, unifying, fruitful and resilient covenant relationship with us. But such a personal, constructive relationship has conditions.

If we are not meeting them our relationship with God is broken.

But, God still loves us. Even now he is saying, **"Return to me."** Whether you have been lost your whole life or you turned away just yesterday, return to me. **"Return to me."**