

## Helping People Grow – The Three Trees Jeremiah 17:5-10

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In 2 Peter chapter 3 we read, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

How should you understand yourself, your life situation and your God--in a biblical way--so that you can “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?”

Jeremiah 17:5-10 gives us a biblical metaphor that points us to the answer.

Matthew writes similarly in Matthew 7:16-18,

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”

In our basic biblical counseling training course we talk about the eight workaholics. Their outward behavior is identical, but the reason for it is different for each one. Let me explain by giving you a quick chart to look at on the screen.

NAME	SINFUL DESIRE	PRESENTATION OF THE DESIRE
Mr. A	Greed	Wants to buy/own expensive luxury items
Ms. B	Fear/Worry	Afraid of financial loss, unsure about her future
Ms. C	Envy	Jealous of her brother’s success, Parents loved him more
Mr. D	Reputation/Pride	Wants his neighbors to view him highly
Mr. E	Escape	Doesn’t want to go home. Bad marriage and family life.
Mr. F	Pre-Adultery	Wife nags him at home, secretary praises him at work.
Ms. G	Fear of Man	Afraid of displeasing her boss. Needs his approval.
Mr. H	Self-righteous	Proud of his work ethic, does the right thing.

In each case, the person can justify/rationalize their workaholic behavior. Jeremiah 17:9 says that the human heart is deceitful.

What do they all need to do? Change their hearts!

In Joel 2:12-13 we read: “Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”

This is biblical hope in the midst of our sin. When the Bible holds out hope to us, it’s not wishful thinking, like, “I hope it doesn’t rain today.” Biblical hope is a settled conviction of something that will occur. There isn’t much in this life that fits that category of certainty. Sure, some things get close. Like my expectation that I will get a paycheck at the end of the workweek, or my hope

of having dinner tonight when I get home. Things similar to this. But even these can be interrupted by various circumstances. Biblical hope, however, is certain. It will happen. That is a transforming hope if I'm living with it and it controls my heart.

Many years ago, someone took the passage that we began with in Jeremiah 17 and created a pictorial model that is very helpful in explaining to us how we change. Today, that model is commonly referred to as the three-tree model.

You'll see it on the screen as I walk through it.

Above everything you'll see a triangle. That triangle represents God. And the three corners represent that God is sovereign, wise, and good. This is one of the truths from Romans 8:28 – 30,

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

The circle represents the sphere of circumstances and experiences in which we find ourselves. Another way of putting it would be that the circle represents life under God's provision for us. And it is in this provision and the circumstances that God brings into our lives that he works all things together for good.

Within that sphere of our lives God brings both heat and dew. The heat is represented by the sun, and the dew is represented by the drops of water. What do I mean by heat and dew?

When I talk about heat I'm talking about those things in our lives that we would consider hardships, trials, suffering, or even simply the effects of sin and curse from the fall of Adam. The heat may include simple general life hardships, it may include being sinned against by others, it may include health problems, it may include getting poor counsel or false teaching, or even the effects of the demonic world.

When I talk about dew, I'm talking about blessings. I'm talking about the good things from the common grace of God as well as direct blessing to us from God. These can be an issue because of our sinful hearts. It is easy for believers to distort even the good things that God gives and turn them into sin. Let me give you a personal example from my past.

For a period of time many years ago I had a problem with gluttony. And the blessings in my life from God I turned to sin in this way. I made enough money that I could go to a fast food restaurant whenever I wanted. I like to go out to eat after church on Sundays with people in the congregation and God blessed us at the time with many friends who enjoyed the same thing. And because at that time in our lives God had blessed us financially, we had the wherewithal to be able to do those things. And so, can you see how I even turned the blessings of money and friends into sin? Why would I do this? Will see that next.

But before we do, let me make it very clear. Your situation does not cause or determine your behavior. Though it may influence, encourage, or discourage you your sin is a choice that you have made. It is not caused by another person or the circumstances in which God has placed you.

The tree on the left and the tree on the right of the diagram represent two kinds of people. And as you see, each person has two levels. One level is the root, and the other is the fruit.

On the left we see a thorn bush. The thorn bush represents foolish, fleshly, ungodly behavior. It is bad fruit. It is sinful behavior. The bad fruit thorn tree represents a person's ungodly responses to the different circumstances of life. It is sinful in words, actions, and emotions. And the fruit is bad because the root is bad. A bad route equates to a sinful heart.

As in the use of any metaphor or illustration, it is important to understand the point of the author and not make it say more than it does. Jeremiah is stressing the significance of the hearts of the people. Heat certainly affects growth and fruitfulness, but the source of all the trees health and fruitfulness is the soil in which it is planted. In the same way, heat affects people, but their choices emerge from their heart desires, intentions, and commitments.

On the right side of the diagram we see a tree full of good fruit. It represents godliness and wisdom. It represents a heart tuned to spiritual things. It represents a heart focusing on glorifying God in every aspect of life. The good fruit equates to godly behavior. The good root equates to a godly heart. The godly heart believes the word of God. The godly heart trusts in the gospel and God's provision in Christ. A good fruit tree represents a person who trusts in the Lord and learns to respond in a godly manner to his problems. God's redemptive power at work in the heart and renewal by grace and enables the person to respond in a godly manner to all circumstances.

In the middle we see the third tree. Representing God and his provisions through the cross. God has provided in Christ mercy, forgiveness, godly wisdom, hope, and the power of his word. Galatians 5:24 reminds us that, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

We need to better understand the cross. We sing about it, and what we sing is true, that is – the power of the cross over death and sin. The redemptive aspect of the cross is paramount. But the cross also requires something of us. Especially in the context of change. A.W Tozer writes, "The cross of Roman times knew no compromise; it never made concessions. It won all arguments by killing its opponent and silencing him for good. It spared not Christ but slew Him the same as the rest. He was alive when they hung Him on that cross and completely dead when they took Him down six hours later. That was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history... The cross effects its ends by destroying one established pattern, the victim's, and creating another pattern, its own. Thus, it always has its way. It wins by defeating its opponent and imposing its will upon him. It always dominates. It never compromises, never dickers nor confers, never surrenders a point for the sake of peace. It cares not for peace; it cares only to end its opposition as fast as possible.

With perfect knowledge of all this, Christ said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." So the cross not only brings Christ's life to an end, it ends also the first life, the old life, of every one of His true followers. It destroys the old

pattern, the Adam pattern, in the believer's life, and brings it to an end. Then the God who raised Christ from the dead raises the believer and a new life begins. This, and nothing less, is true Christianity....

We must do something about the cross, and one of two things only we can do—flee it or die upon it.” (The Root of Righteousness, 1955)

The ribbon flowing out of the cross represents the stream in Jeremiah. This is the Holy Spirit application of God's word and God's provision to us. We see this operating in Hebrews 4:12-16.

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”

We see immediately in this text that God has provided provision for us both in his word and through his son.

Yet we also see that there is a problem. The word of God discerned the thoughts and the intentions of our hearts. There is no place to hide. And we must give an account for our sin. God has exposed us. And God has judged us.

- Your heart has thoughts. Your heart has intentions.
- While the world at large would disagree, God makes it clear that your heart is not basically good.
- Even as a Christian you struggle with unruly wants, sinful desires, wrong drives, “needs”, sinful passions, and misplaced expectations.
- Hebrews tells us that our hearts are alive. They are not empty or passive.

But then we see that God has provided a great provision for us through Jesus. Jesus is our high priest. Jesus sympathizes with our weakness and temptation. This Jesus who did not sin provides a way of righteousness to us.

This Jesus is merciful and gives us grace in our time of need.

The crucified, risen Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, can solve your personal and relational problems. Jesus provides the forgiveness, the wisdom, and the power you and I need to grow as a believer and handle life in a godly way.

## REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. HEAT: What is your situation?
2. THORNS: How are you responding?
3. BAD ROOT: What do you expect, crave, demand or believe?
4. VICIOUS CIRCLE: What are the consequences of your reaction?
5. CROSS: What does God reveal with respect to you and your situation?
6. GOOD ROOT: What should rule you? Turn to God!
7. GOOD FRUIT: What should you do now? Do it!
8. GRACIOUS CIRCLE: What are the consequences of your godly response?