

OpenTheo

January 11th: Jeremiah 10 & 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

January 10, 2021



Alastair Roberts

A man's way is not in himself. Paul's concern for sexual morality.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Jeremiah 10. Hear the word that the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord, Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens, because the nations are dismayed at them.

For the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold.

They fasten it with hammer and nails, so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak. They have to be carried, for they cannot walk.

Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might.

Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due. For among all the wise ones of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like you. They are both stupid and foolish.

The instruction of idols is but wood. Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Euphaz. They are the work of the craftsmen, and of the hands of the goldsmith.

Their clothing is violet and purple. They are all the work of skilled men. But the Lord is the true God.

He is the living God, and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation. Thus shall you say to them, The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.

It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom, and by His understanding stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and He brings forth the wind from His storehouses.

Every man is stupid and without knowledge. Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion.

At the time of their punishment they shall perish. Not like these is He who is the portion of Jacob, for He is the One who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance. The Lord of hosts is His name.

Gather up your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under siege. For thus says the Lord, Behold I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time, and I will bring distress on them, that they may feel it. Woe is me because of my hurt.

My wound is grievous. But I said, Truly this is an affliction, and I must bear it. My tent is destroyed, and all my cords are broken.

My children have gone from me, and they are not. There is no one to spread my tent again, and to set up my curtains. For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of the Lord.

Therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered. A voice, a rumor, behold it comes, a great commotion out of the north country, to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals. I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

Correct me, O Lord, but in justice, not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing. Pour

out your wrath on the nations that know you not, and on the peoples that call not on your name. For they have devoured Jacob, they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation.

In Jeremiah chapter 10 the Lord declares the powerlessness of the idols in which the nations trust. Israel's God is the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who has the power to direct the course of history.

Idols are powerless, and those who trust in them are foolish. But Israel's portion is the Lord. Verses 1-10 have a bookended or chiasmic structure.

It begins with the ways of the nations, and the fact that they are dismayed at the heavens. And in verse 10 we see the nations not being able to endure the Lord's indignation. The description of idols as creations of silver and gold is seen in verse 4 and then also in verse 9. After that the idols are described like scarecrows in verse 5, which parallels in verse 8 with the description of their instruction being like wood.

At the very heart of the section, in verses 6-7 is a doxology concerning the Lord, juxtaposing the incomparable King of the nations with the wise of the nations, among which none like the Lord can be found. Challenges to idolatry are found in a number of the other prophets, perhaps most famously in the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 18-25. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains.

He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in, who brings the princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Another such statement against the idols of the nations is found in Isaiah chapter 44 verses 10-17.

Who fashions a god, or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

The ironsmith takes a cutting tool, and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers, and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails.

He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass.

He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it.

Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread.

Also he makes a god and worships it. He makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire.

Over the half he eats meat. He roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire.

And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for you are my god. The idols are characterised in these verses as those that lack the power to move, to speak, to walk, to do good or to do evil.

They are described as vapour or vanity or emptiness. The Lord wants his people to notice what they are made of. Getting people to reflect upon what something is constructed of is one of the best ways to overturn a fetish.

We like to think in the modern world that we are beyond idolatry. Many of us might think it ridiculous that people could look at such a physical object and see in it a god. Yet we have not moved beyond the human tendency to fetishise things.

There are times when we might need to be reminded of the way that we impute value to things. We may not be constructing idols of wood and silver and gold, but we can spend so much of our lives chasing after paper and plastic. Indeed, to heighten the sense of emptiness, we don't even need plastic or paper.

Mere pixels on a screen can become all-determinative for some people's sense of self-worth. We invest our sense of our social status, and many men their masculinity, in mere constructions of steel. Like the idols that Jeremiah speaks about, these are things that focus our desire.

They dominate our imaginations. They are what we begin to live for. People will surrender their dignity.

They will betray family and friends. They will abandon values they once held dear, merely to pursue these empty things. If we think we have escaped the pull of idolatry

that we see in the book of Jeremiah, perhaps we simply haven't looked closely enough at the largely empty things that we can devote our lives to.

The Lord is contrasted with all of these things. He is the living God. He is the creator of all.

Before him the earth quakes. The nations devote their energies to the service of silver and gold and wood to paper to plastic to pixels. But the people of God devote themselves to his worship.

The gods represented by these idols did not make the heavens and the earth, and they shall perish before the God who made all of these things. He is the God with the power to act. Walter Brueggemann writes, the verbs used to speak of Yahweh are indicative of the power of this God.

He made, he established, he stretched out. He utters, he sends up, makes rise, he makes, he brings out. He formed.

The language is of creation, which is done by Yahweh's powerful speech and by Yahweh's forming activity. The modes of creation of both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are captured in these verbs. In Genesis 1 God creates by powerful speech.

In Genesis 2 Yahweh makes by acting, as a potter. Both modes are utilised in our text. The appellations of Yahweh are stunning.

True God, Living God, Everlasting King, Portion of Jacob, Lord of hosts. Yahweh is the true and reliable God, contrasted with the idols of falseness. This God does what has been promised and keeps commitments to the world God has made.

This God is a Living God. This God has the power for life, the capacity to work a real newness, to cause life where there is only death and chaos. Besides being the Creator God over all of the false idols of man's creation, He is the God of Israel, who has chosen Israel for Himself as His own inheritance.

They are His people. He is also Jacob's portion. If Israel is the Lord's, the Lord is also Israel's.

The incomparability of the Lord is made known at the time of judgment. It is at the time of judgment or punishment that the power of the true God to act and the powerlessness of the idols is truly exposed. Verses 17 and following return to describing the judgment that is about to fall upon the people of Judah.

They must prepare themselves for exile. They must pack their bags. In Ezekiel chapter 12 verses 3-4 we have a similar warning given in the form of a prophetic sign that is performed.

As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage and go into exile by day in their sight. You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house.

You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight as baggage for exile and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight as those do who must go into exile. Verses 19-20 are another lamentation of the prophet over the anticipated judgment that will come upon the people. It will involve a loss of home, the tent being destroyed, all the cords being broken and a loss of children.

The primary reason for all of this is because of the stupidity of the shepherds. The leaders of the people have been unfaithful. They have not inquired of the Lord.

They have not taught and guided the people and the flock of the people are scattered. And as a result the judgment from the north country, the judgment that he has been speaking about from chapter 1 onwards will come upon them, leaving Judah and Jerusalem a desolate place and a lair of wild beasts. Recognizing the sovereignty of the Lord, the fact that the Lord is the one who truly directs people's steps, Jeremiah requests the Lord's chastening, gentle correction by which he can grow and reform, rather than angry punishment by which he might be destroyed.

He is acutely aware of the limitations of human knowledge and intention. We have our purposes and intentions. We think that we understand what we are doing.

But we neither understand our way nor direct our paths. The Lord is the one who is sovereign over both of these things. For this reason, Jeremiah turns to the Lord for his direction, his discipline, his guidance and correction.

The chapter concludes with his request that the Lord judge the nations that are devouring Judah. At the end of the book we will see this request being answered. The nations and especially Babylon will be brought down by the Lord.

While they trust in their might and strategy and wealth and power, the Lord is really the one who directs their steps and he will be the one who judges them when the time comes. A question to consider, how might Jeremiah's statements of verses 23 and 24 instruct us in our search for guidance from the Lord? First Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 to 12 Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong

his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders, and be dependent on no one. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 begins with a finally in many translations.

Gordon Fee, however, suggests that it might be better translated as, as for other matters. The main purpose of this first epistle to the Thessalonians is the relationship between Paul and his companions and the Thessalonians, which occupies the significant majority of the letter. However Paul also wishes to exhort the Thessalonians to continue in what they had been taught.

He speaks as though most of the Thessalonians were adhering to the teaching that he and his companions had instructed them in, yet some might be diverting from it, which is why he reiterates it, without rebuking the entire church or belabouring the points. Paul entreats and exhorts the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus. He speaks to them gently.

One of the important features of apostolic rhetoric is its preference for gentle persuasion and reasoning over command, prohibition or rebuke. There are occasions when these things are appropriate, but most of the time we have persuasion and reasoning. Such rhetoric is designed for the mature, for people who have a stronger internal grasp of what is good.

By contrast the rhetoric of the law is far more designed for people in a state of infancy and immaturity. Persuasion furnishes us with reasons for action that we can internalise and possess as our own. Command, however, gives us external reasons for action when we are not at a point when we can internalise the reasons yet.

Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians as people in Christ who have his spirit indwelling them, and as mature people who can be reasoned with and persuaded and won over. He has already instructed the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus on the matters that he is about to teach them on again, speaking to them as one with apostolic authority. Now he takes the opportunity to repeat the instructions that he has already given them.

The teaching he gives relates to a fundamental issue in how we relate to God, about God's desire for us, namely the fact that God desires our sanctification. Sanctification relates to being blameless in holiness, which Paul mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 13.

Being holy involves being set apart, and one of the aspects of this that Paul often draws attention to in his letters is holiness in sexual matters, speaking of our bodies, or perhaps more particularly our sexual organs, as vessels.

Paul maintains that we need to control our vessels in holiness and honour. We have been devoted to the service of the Lord and we must treat our bodies accordingly. Self-control is emphasised here, in contrast to the Gentiles who are ignorant of God and who act in the passion of lust, their uncontrolled desires controlling them.

The categories of holiness and honour are really important and prominent ones for Pauline sexual ethics. The categories that far exceed are more customary categories for sexual morality that can boil down to little more than consent. For instance, the concept of same-sex relations as a form of dishonouring the body is an important aspect of Paul's argument against such practices in Romans chapter 1. Paul's teaching of sexual ethics rests on a very different view of the person, and he expresses this ethic most fully in 1 Corinthians 6 verses 9-20.

of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.

Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body, and God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh.

But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. As Christians, our bodies have been visibly marked out for resurrection in the seal of baptism.

Our bodies are the limbs and organs of Christ. Our bodies are the temple or the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells not merely within our minds or within our hearts, but in our bodies.

Our bodies are the self as an object, even to ourselves. Before I have subjective awareness, before I have agency or volition, I am my body. My body is the very root of

my being.

It's my place in the world. It's the thing that people relate to as me. Our bodies, however, are marked out as holy.

They're marked out as God's own. God claims us at the very deepest part of ourselves. Our bodies are the site of shame, of felt mortality, of weakness, of death, and many, many other things like that.

We may feel exposed to the judgement of others in our bodies as their gaze falls upon us. We may feel violated by things that others have done to our bodies, or things that we have done with our bodies. We may feel that our bodies are failing us as we age, or through forms of infirmity or disability.

We may feel, for instance, wrongly stigmatised by others on account of our bodies, perhaps because of our racial or our ethnic appearance. Yet God has claimed our bodies for himself, and he will raise up these bodies on the last day. Our bodies, being set apart for God, have great dignity and must be treated as holy accordingly.

Our bodies are earthly, they're mortal, they're weak, they're ungainly, and generally somewhat unattractive. The scriptures never suggest otherwise. The scriptures don't divinise the body.

They don't pretend that the body is anything other than what it is. However, God has made these bodies a realm of his habitation, and he desires to raise them up. He values our bodies, and he relates to us in our bodies, not just in ourselves detached from our bodies.

This is why sexual ethics is such a hugely important issue for Paul. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and if your body has been set apart by the Lord, you must treat your body accordingly. Paul particularly speaks to those who are sexually immoral, and wronging their brother in this matter.

Perhaps he has in mind a man having an adulterous relationship with another man's wife. However, sexual behaviour in general is for Paul, not something that can be privatised, as we tend to imagine. Our bodies belong to Christ, they have been bought at a price by him, so we don't have the right to do what we wish with them.

Husbands and wives must honour each other with their bodies. Whatever physical or psychological prophylactics we might employ, we cannot engage in sexual relations without acting towards another person's very self. Beyond this, sexual holiness has implications for our neighbours.

Sexual immorality in the Church compromises the whole body in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 5, as he says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Sexual immorality is

also something that the Lord will judge. This is a fact which Paul and his companions had solemnly warned the Thessalonians about.

To dismiss the importance of sexual holiness is to sin against God himself, who has sanctified our bodies for himself by the gift of his indwelling spirit. God has called us for the very end of holiness, and sexual impurity runs directly contrary to God's intent in salvation. We disregard this at our very peril.

Paul concludes this section by turning to discuss the duty of love. This is something that they had already been taught by God. Perhaps Paul has in view the new covenant promise of God's more direct teaching of his people by the Holy Spirit.

This is something the Thessalonians already knew. Paul is spurring them on to act more faithfully in terms of it. The issue that precipitates Paul's teaching seems to be the behaviour of some indigents in the community, who are selfishly taking advantage of the provision of others and living off others' generosity when they could and should be providing for themselves.

Acting in such a manner is unloving to others and dishonours the church before outsiders. It is an honourable thing to live in a way that is provident and not dependent. We should aspire to live quiet lives that aren't disruptive, concerning ourselves with our own affairs, working with our own hands in our own labours, and seeking to be as self-sufficient as possible.

People who don't live in such a manner are disruptive, they get into other people's business, they make themselves a nuisance and a burden in their communities and prevent their communities from doing things that they could do otherwise. When we live in an appropriate manner however, we will not selfishly make ourselves a burden upon others and we will also be able to serve people ourselves much more readily. Living in such a manner will also be respectable in the eyes of the world around, which besides improving the church's witness is a good thing in itself, as it manifests the holiness to which we have been called.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which the aspiration to self-sufficiency is important for the practice of love?