

A national magazine for pastors once carried a rating system for sermons similar to the rating system we're all familiar with for movies. It went something like this. The person who designed it was a little bit cynical. Here is the rating he gave to various kinds of sermons:

"G" - Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive, childlike platitudes; usually described as "wonderful" or "marvelous" by those who leave church to shake the hands of the pastor.

"MC" - For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the gospel relevant to today's issues; it may even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as "challenging" or "thought provoking," though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.

"R" - Definitely restricted to those not upset by truth. This sermon "tells it like it is" and threatens the comfortable; most often described as "disturbing" or "controversial;" usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income (since his job security is definitely suspect).

"X" - Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really "socks it to 'em." It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as "shocking" or even in "poor taste." The pastor who preaches this sermon had better have his or her suitcases packed and life insurance paid for. (1)

According to this rating system the prophet Jeremiah was definitely an X-rated preacher. More than any other prophet Jeremiah suffered as a result of his preaching. People rarely wanted to listen to his pronouncements. And no wonder. It seemed, even to Jeremiah, that all he ever talked about was bad news. At one point Jeremiah cried out: "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction . . ." (Jeremiah 20:8).

Jeremiah came from a family of priests. God called him to become a prophet at a very young age, and he served God for more than 40 years. He spoke God's words during the reigns of three kings and witnessed the nation's destruction by the Babylonians. He is called the Weeping Prophet because he also wrote the book of Lamentations after Jerusalem was destroyed including the Temple and its people carried off into captivity.

Jeremiah was also a suffering prophet who was persecuted by kings and rejected by his own people because of his forceful condemnation of idolatry and social injustice. Eventually, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, Jeremiah was killed in Egypt by his countrymen who had fled there. (2)

God had called Jeremiah to "tell it like it is" to a people who had disregarded God's law. They rejected his teachings and they suffered for it. And he suffered as well because of their rejection. So it is quite refreshing to come to today's reading from Jeremiah. No fireworks. No scolding of the people of Israel. Jeremiah changes his tone altogether.

This passage was written during Israel's exile. It was a dark time in Israel's history. It's been said that the task of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Jeremiah had done his job superbly of afflicting Israel when it was in the comfort of its sin; now it is time for him to be a comforter during their time of exile. In fact, this section of Jeremiah is often called the "Book of Consolation." The words are so beautiful and so profound that they are welcome to our ears just as they were to the ears of Jeremiah's audience:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Let's think about those moving and hopeful words for a few moments. God is making a new covenant with Israel. Pastor Jeff Strite compares Israel's situation to a situation in our own land just a few years ago. Some of you'll remember when mortgage rates stood at 9 to 10%. But then interest rates went down to about half that. What did people do? That's right. Many people marched down to the bank and refinanced their homes. They asked the banks to make out "new contracts" with lower monthly payments. (3)

Jeremiah is saying that God is unilaterally making a new contract or covenant with the people of Israel.

God is giving the people of Israel the chance to begin again. That's the wonderful thing about God, isn't it? God is a God of second and third and even fourth chances.

One night in a church service a young woman felt the tug of the Holy Spirit in her heart. The young woman had a very rough past, involving alcohol, drugs and prostitution. But, the change in her was evident. As time went on she became a faithful member of the church. She eventually became involved in the ministry teaching young children. It was not very long until this thoroughly converted young woman had caught the eye and the heart of a youth minister. The relationship grew and they began to make wedding plans. This is when the problems began.

You see, about one half of the church did not think that a woman with a past such as hers was suitable for a youth minister. The church began to argue and fight about the matter. So they decided to have a meeting. As the people made their arguments and tensions increased, the meeting got completely out of hand. The young woman became very upset about all the things being brought up about her past. As she began to cry, the young man stood to speak. He could not bear the pain all this was causing his wife-to-be. He began to speak and his statement was this: "My fiancé's past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of Christ to wash away our sin and make us new persons. So, does he wash away sin or not?" (4)

Powerful question: Does Christ wash away sin or not? If he does not, we are all in trouble.

Pastor Dennis Becker uses the analogy of a trick bar of soap. The trick soap looks like a real bar of soap, but when you wash with it, you get dirty instead of clean. The more you wash, the dirtier you get. He recalls watching an episode of the old television program *Candid Camera* when Allen Funt was the host. Funt had planted a fake bar of soap in a washroom and recorded the reactions of those who washed their hands with it. It was funny to watch them scrub and scrub and never get clean. It was comical. (5)

It would be comical if soap did not get our hands clean. If Christ does not wash away our sins, it would be more than comical; it would be tragic. In Jeremiah, God says to us, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God is the God of second chances. God had a contentious relationship with Israel and indeed with all humanity. But Israel was God's chosen people. They were to be a light unto the world in God's behalf. In this passage from Jeremiah, God calls Himself a husband to Israel. But Israel continually wanders from the relationship. And God has to keep tugging her back. But each time He does bring her back. God loves Israel too much to leave her in her sin.

A few years ago, best-selling author John Grisham wrote a book titled *The Testament*. The key figure in the novel is a disgraced corporate attorney named Nate O'Reilly. Nate is plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God. Listen to how John Grisham describes the transformation:

"With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list [of his sins], mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered to God. 'Please, help me.'

“As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.” (6)

That is a fictionalized account of a real life experience that countless people have experienced over the centuries since Christ came into the world. They have known their sins forgiven. They have found themselves made clean.

And they have been able to make a new beginning.

Here’s what we need to understand: Christ has made a new covenant with us..

1. Franklin Ishida, “Preaching on the Lessons,” *The Clergy Journal*, Oct 2001, p. 38.
2. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/58499038/Overcoming-Low-Self-Esteem-Jeremiah-1-4-10-Sermon>.
3. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-new-hope-jeff-strite-sermon-on-kingdom-of-god-70969.asp?Page=2>.
4. **Adapted from Andrew H. Rogers, <https://sermons.logos.com/submissions/11254-The-Blood#content=/submissions/11254>.**
5. *Emphasis*, Mar/Apr 2001, p. 37.6. (Random House, 1999), p. 374; submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, IL. Cited at http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=25164.
6. James W. Moore, *Standing on the Promises or Sitting on the Premises* (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1995), pp. 88-89.