

**Date:** February 17-18, 2024

**Title:** Return to Me: Lesson of the Linen Cloth

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 13

**Speaker:** Kurt Bjorklund

Last weekend, we started a series that we're calling *Return to Me*, which is focused on the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah. We've called the series *Return to Me* because it's part of his overall theme. Jeremiah's one of those books in the Old Testament that if you've ever tried to read through your Bible, it's one of those that's really hard to get through.

You know how this works. If you've ever tried to read through your Bible, you start in Genesis. It's good. Exodus is pretty good. You hit Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers, and you're like, what in the world? And then you get back on track for a while, and then you come to Jeremiah and Ezekial, and you're thinking that I'm not going to finish this because Jeremiah is 50 plus chapters, 52 chapters to be exact, of doom and gloom and judgment.

And so, you say, well, great, why are we doing Jeremiah? Well, it's Lent, and it's the season of reflection. And rather than taking 52 weeks and doing all the chapters, we thought we'd do the CliffsNotes version of Jeremiah. And we do the object lessons that he teaches that give us a flavor of the book. Hopefully, it will help us in this time leading up to Easter, leading up to Good Friday, to reflect on who God is and what it would mean to align our hearts with Him.

For some of us who are here, maybe that's the desire of your heart to say, that's what I want. Hopefully, these images, these pictures, will help draw your heart to God. And for some, maybe we're here and we say, I know what it is to follow God. It's kind of what I want, but I know that right now I'm not prioritizing that. And our hope, again, is just that the calls, the images would prick our hearts. For some of us, we're here, and we're not sure if we want to follow Jesus.

My hope, my prayer is that, again, these images, these pictures, that Jeremiah uses would call your heart toward the glory of who God is. In some ways, I've chosen these images because they're images, they're object lessons. It's a little bit like a children's sermon. If you've ever been in a church that does the children's sermon, again, you have the object, and the object lesson is a picture that often communicates in a way that sticks with us easier than maybe a lot of words.

Today we're going to look at this picture of the linen belt. We talked about the broken cisterns last week, and the linen belt story is told in Jeremiah chapter 13 verses 1 through 11. A linen belt is not hard to understand, but it's not something that we just naturally go, oh, I know exactly what that is. So, I have a cloth here. This is just a cloth, not really a linen belt, but it's probably a similar size. And so, what the people would do is they would wear a linen belt around their waist. Some translations say a linen loincloth or something like that. They would wear it kind of around their midsection, around their loins, to keep it kind of all in place.

If you were to think about kind of the way that this would work, they would have these long flowing robes that they would wear. And in an arid hot climate, what would happen was their robes, sometimes would flow, and the loincloth would keep everything kind of concealed at one time. All right, you get the picture? So, it's not quite underwear, but it's not really

outerwear. It's kind of somewhere in between. And, you know, I thought about really going all in on this and doing the full usher today, but I spared you because no one needs to see that.

So, here's the question, why does God say to Jeremiah, take this this clean linen belt and stick it in this river where it's going to get all soiled and nasty? Why does God say this is the image that I want you to use, and what does it have to do with us? God says to Jeremiah, go take this linen belt and put it in this river. The river is potentially hundreds of miles away, or it could be a stream that's closer. It really doesn't matter for the impact of the story either way. He was to go and put it there, and then they would see that this belt would be something that they wouldn't want to wear.

And so, we're going to just ask and answer three questions. First, really, what is the significance of the clean linen belt? And then secondly, what is the significance of the soiled or dirty linen belt? And then finally, what are we to do with the soiled, dirty linen belt? Here's the first question, and that is, what is the significance of the clean linen belt?

What we see is that verse 11 tells us about this. It says, "For as a belt is bound around the waist, so I bound all the people of Israel and all the people of Judah to me," declares the LORD, "to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened." Now, I don't know how the people of Israel and Judah strike you when you hear those phrases. My guess is that for some of us, it just is like, well, some ancient people, groups, that have something to do with God.

Let me just give you a really quick overview of the Old Testament. So, we have what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the Old Testament is all of these books that are at the beginning of your Bible. The way that it's written in Genesis is obviously the book of beginnings, and it tells about how God created people. And then Adam and Eve, through eating of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden fell, cascaded the world into brokenness, and God began to call a people to himself to point the world back to his way.

It begins with Abraham and becomes the nation of Israel. And Israel then, our God's chosen people, and through a series of events they end up in Egypt. And there's the whole liberation of the people from Egypt. And when you get into Joshua, they're trying to claim the promised land and Judges, the rule by judges, and then there's a period that's known as the United Kingdom. And this is where you have the Kings, where you have Saul, David, and Solomon reigning, and this is God's people for the world. And then what happens is the kingdom is divided. And this is a lot of the Old Testament where a lot of the confusion comes in because somewhere kind of in Second Samuel, Second Kings, you get the divided kingdom where you get Israel and Judah as two distinct nations, still the people of God and a lot of judgment. Then the people end up in exile, and then they come back from exile. And that's kind of the Old Testament.

The exile is the punishment for God's people. When you read about Judah or you read about Israel, you're reading about these people that God had called to represent him to the world. And what's more is you are reading, in the case of Jeremiah, about a prophet who's saying if you don't return to the Lord, there will be some outcomes. And so, he's prophesying in part

about this time of exile. In part two, some of the people had already gone into exile. You read about this in Jeremiah 29.

Now, I get that some of you are like, okay, that was a fire hose description of the Old Testament. I'm not sure I'm following yet. So, let me just try to bring this closer to home. God was always calling up people throughout history. What he does here is he's saying, I bound myself to the people of Israel and to the people of Judah. The word bound is the Hebrew word "debach." And it first shows up in Genesis where a man and a woman would "debach." They would come together, they would leave their families, and they would join. This is God's picture. He says I joined myself to you to be my people and to be my renown. In other words, I wanted everyone to know, to the praise and glory that you were my people.

So, here's my question, how did that work out, the people of Israel being the people of God? In many ways not that well. Right? Because even today, when you talk about Israel, there is some confusion and you're like, are they really taking God's word and renowned throughout the world? Well, some of the challenges were happening all the way back at the beginning and here in Jeremiah. What you have today, and there's some theological debate around this, but you have the church now acting as the people of God.

And there's some difference of thought. Some people would say, well, the church has been grafted in and God still has a plan for ethnic Israel. Other people would say the church is completely the inheritor of the plan of God as the people of God. But either way, it's clear that the church is now the people of God. And what you have here is you have God saying, this has always been my plan.

I don't know about you, but if I were God, and it's a good thing I wasn't, what I would have done to try to communicate to the world was something really cool and way more reliable than counting on people. What I mean by that is I probably would, you know, every few years send a meteor to earth that landed in an unpopulated area, didn't hurt anybody, and left a big imprint that said, I am God. Follow me. Like unmistakable fire so that people would say boom, it's God. I would do something like that. But people who could do all kinds of crazy stuff, I'm not sure that would have been my "A" plan, but this is what God chose to do.

What we see in the New Testament is that this is still how God is working. This is Matthew chapter five, what's known as the Sermon on the Mount verses 13 through 16. Listen to how Jesus talks to his followers. He says, "You are the salt of the earth." So now he's talking to his followers, and he uses the plural here. He says, "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

And so, Jesus takes the same idea and says, I am calling a people who are going to be for my renown. You're like salt. Salt prevents corruption. You're like light. It prevents confusion. He says this is my calling to my people. And so, the linen belt, the clean linen belt, signifies in a sense, the call of God's people to be a testimony to the whole world, for God's renown, for people to say that's what it looks like. In fact, this image here in Matthew is where Saint

Augustine got his two cities analogy. You've heard maybe about the city of God and in the city of our world where he says there's a city, there's an alternate city within the city, and it's the people of God, and the people of God are this alternate city. They show people what things look like when God rules. That's the idea, and that's what God has been doing.

And so, what you have then is you have Jeremiah being told to get this linen belt and to go and hide it in this place by this river. So, he takes it, sets it down, and goes away. What we're told is that it kind of gets soiled up here by the river. He wasn't to put it in the river. And so, it kind of comes out a little soiled. He has to take this at that point, and maybe it ends up with a little river water that kind of washes on it. He says this is now your linen belt. Okay? So, is anybody interested in putting that on? I mean, no, of course not. Right? That's kind of disgusting. You're like, I don't want to wear that thing.

And so, that leads to the second question. What's the significance of the dirty linen belt? Why is this the image, the message, that God gave to Jeremiah to say, I want you to do this and say this to your people? What we see in Jeremiah is this. In verse eight, we're told, "Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.'" So, he says, I'm going to take your pride again. Speaking to his own people. This is not for the people of the world. This is, in this case, his own people. He says I'm going to ruin the pride just like that's ruined. And then he says this, "These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless!"

Now, in a way, this again was a prophecy to the people of Israel. But Jesus picks up the same imagery in the Sermon on the Mount when he says salt that has lost its saltiness isn't good for anything except to be trampled underfoot. And light that's covered is basically worthless. And so, he's saying this is the way that this works.

He talks about pride. And what pride is, is basically lifting itself up against God. It's saying, I don't need a God. Sometimes this is put well in maybe a way that we don't expect. I saw a *Babylon Bee* article recently, which, if you're not familiar, it's kind of like *The Onion*, but a Christian version that pokes fun at things kind of by satire.

Here's what they wrote. "'What Has God Ever Done For Me?' Asks Man Breathing Air" - Lynwood, Wa. It says, "Sources confirmed Tuesday that local freethinker Jared Olson called into question the "absurd" idea that God had ever done anything for him, all while inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide in a complex process well beyond his mind's capability of understanding in its entirety.

"The idea of 'god' is really just holding us back," Olson opined, addressing the other members of the philosophy club at Edmonds Community College, as the membrane across his larynx vibrated to modulate the flow of air from his lungs, making his speech audible to the people listening, whose intricate ear structures then instantly transformed the invisible sound waves into abstract thought in their brain's nervous tissue.

Olson went on to pursue the line of reasoning even further, claiming that mankind has science, medicine, and mathematics to thank for its continued existence rather than any sort

of all-powerful creator, for which there is "absolutely no evidence." According to eyewitnesses, he made these claims as the surface his feet rested on continued to spin around the earth's core without any input from him, all while the only known habitable planet on which he stood rocketed around the center of the galaxy in perfect formation at the unfathomable rate of 490,000 miles per hour.

At one point during his expertly-crafted speech, Olson reportedly glanced around the room to observe the nods of approval from his peers, his eyes' hundreds of millions of cone and rod cells responding to stimuli in an unimaginably sophisticated procedure. As these elaborate structures continued to capture and process an unbelievable volume of input per second, Olson reported he was all the more confident from the looks of those around him that he had proved his case."

You know, sometimes pride is that idea that says, I don't need a God. God isn't that helpful to me. Some statistics say that in our culture today 84% of people would say enjoying themselves is the highest goal of their life. 86% of people would say that pursuing the things that they desire most is one of the most important things in their life. And 91% of people believe that to find themselves, they have to look within. So, look at verse 9. It says, "These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods..."

So, here we see the essence of something that lifts itself up against God. There he uses the word wicked because one of the things that keeps us from coming to God is the assertion or the belief that we are good in and of ourselves and we define our goodness. It's a self-righteousness that says I have it together and I don't need anybody to ever tell me that I don't.

And then there's this idea of refusing to listen to my words. And the second aspect of our pride isn't just asserting our goodness or self-righteousness. It's asserting our self-autonomy, saying, I don't need a God to tell me, and if I think there's a better way than what the Bible says or what God says, then my way must be right, because my reason is higher than God's.

And then there's what I'd call self-actualization or fulfillment, which is following the stubborn desires of our hearts and serving and worshiping other gods saying, I need these other things to show the way in my life. And so, what you have is you have self-righteousness, self-autonomy, and self-fulfillment. In many ways, it sounds just like our world, and Jeremiah's saying this has become my people who were made for my renown. And because you are living with these values, you've become, he says, completely worthless. You become like the soiled linen belt.

In some ways, it's like taking this idea of the Westminster Catechism Confession of Faith that talks about the chief end of man being to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and saying the chief end of man is to enjoy himself forever. But God made us for something infinitely greater than what it is that we worship when we worship ourselves. And what he's doing is he's simply saying this, and that is to the degree that you assert your goodness over others, that you assert your autonomy, your authority, that you assert your need for self-fulfillment, you will not be an effective part of my people. Again, Jesus' just simple words of salt lost its

saltiness. What good is it other than to be trampled? Jeremiah's words - It's useless. It's worthless.

I don't know if you saw last week after the Super Bowl, there had been a commercial that was sponsored by this group. We don't really know much about the group. It was called "He Gets Us." And there were these commercials where they showed people washing one another's feet. And it kind of created a stir in the Christian community because there were people kind of what you might call the religious left and the religious right. Neither of them liked it, is basically what happened. And I went down the hole of watching videos that people put on this. I'm not going to tell you kind of where I come out because my point ultimately isn't what I think of this, but it's got something else here.

Here's what happened. People on the left, some of them would be like, how dare those people spend that kind of money to do this. This isn't really what foot washing is about anyway. Then people, some on the religious right, would come out and they would say, well, this is horrible because it's communicating that God is okay with people who sin. And so, there was a lot of strong reaction to this.

But here's what I want you to see, and that is if you start to watch these videos, and I did, it's a little bit like watching MSNBC and then Fox News covering the same event. Have you ever done that? Like there's news and you watch a little bit of MSNBC, a little bit of Fox News, and you're like they're saying that it's the same event, but it doesn't sound like the same event. And that was a little bit of what was happening because here's what happens with your news outlets is they other the other side. And what I mean by that is they say, well, those other people, they're the problem, and everything about how they see it, that's wrong.

And what happens sometimes even in the Christian world is people will do the same thing. And what it is, is it's a sense of self-righteousness, pride, that says we've got it right. Now, I'm not suggesting that there's not a legitimate place to debate evangelism, the methods, and whether or not the messaging was appropriate. I'm not saying that. But it's the appeal that says those people there are the wrong ones.

Because here again, what Jeremiah's saying is that when you can't basically say, God is my authority and I'm going to worship him, then you miss what it is to be my people. And part of that is acknowledging our need, because here's what happened for the people of Israel over and over and over again. They blew it and Jesus came to be the Savior.

And the message of Christianity is, no matter how good you are, your goodness is never enough because it's Jesus who does for you what you can't do. And when that becomes your rubric, your way of seeing the world, instead of saying, well, I've got it right and they've got it wrong, not saying there's not a place to talk about it, but what happens is you start to say, this is not about me asserting my rightness because I am in need of what Jesus Christ has done as much as anybody else. And that puts us in a place where we are the people of God, for the renown of God to His praise, to His glory.

So, what do we do with this soiled linen belt? Well, our thought may be to just reverse these things. Don't be self-righteous. Don't be self-autonomous or authoritative. Don't be full of self-actualization but do the opposite. And you could try that. But I don't know if that's the

whole story. And the reason I say this is because, again, the people of Israel, the people of Judah, the church throughout the pages of the Bible is always blowing it. And that doesn't mean that there isn't a need for a standard, but what it means is there's a need to come and say, I want to understand what Jesus has done.

This is even seen in the Old Testament very clearly. This is Isaiah chapter one, verse 18. Here's what we see. Isaiah, roughly in the same period as Jeremiah. It says, "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.' For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

What's he saying? He's saying the only way to be cleansed is an act of God, not an act of your self-improvement. And so, self-righteousness, goodness, asserting our goodness and saying, I don't want anyone to tell me that I've done wrong is antithetical to the whole message. And the way that the linen belt is cleansed is when we return to the Lord and say He alone is good and has done what I can't do.

But here is what else is key that actually allows you to keep God's standard high. Because if you say, well, you know, I don't want to say that nobody keeps it and everything. What you have to do then to get above that standard is you have to lower the standard a little bit so that you conveniently get above it and then you can other everybody else and say they don't get above it. But I do.

But it's only when we understand the message of Jesus Christ and embrace it in its fullness that says his standard is perfect and I don't meet it, but Jesus does on my behalf, that I can come to say now my linen belt can be clean, and I can be what the people of God are in our culture.

Now, here's the other thing. Some people will say, well, what we need to do is, in order to have our land, our nation, be what it's intended to be, is we need to speak more forcefully into our culture. And for many people, this takes the form of politics. I don't know if you know this, but there's an election coming this year.

Here's what some people of faith do, is they say, well, there are some bad things happening, and if you don't vote this way for this platform or for this candidate or this string of candidates, then everything bad is going to happen in our world. Now, don't misunderstand me. Voting is a responsibility and a privilege and something I believe every person should do. I believe that you should vote your conscience. But I've somehow ended up on both parties' political mail thing, and here's what I can tell you. You could swap out the names of the candidates and the issues for fear-mongering because what they both say is if you don't vote our way, everything is lost. And what happens for some people of faith is they start to go, yes, if we don't vote this way, then here is all the bad stuff that's going to happen.

But do you know that has never been God's answer? His answer has never been make sure you vote well so we can legislate morality to bring about hard change. Now, again, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that voting or bringing about legislation that's positive to Christian thinking isn't good. But what I'm saying is this, that isn't how God had the world

address brokenness. He addressed it through his people. Remember when I said if I had been God, I would have had a better plan, at least in my mind? It's funny to even say that. What was God's "A" plan? The people, the flawed people of Israel, of Judah, the flawed people of the church.

And what he says at one point, this is in Second Chronicles 7 verse 14 is this. He says, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." See what he says. Don't start with the nation, start with my people. And when my people turn, acknowledge their need, that I'm the authority and that self-actualization isn't the goal, then I will forgive their sins. I'll heal their land when you turn toward me. Then I will make things as they can be again.

I'm not saying that elections aren't significant, but what I'm saying is the person that you elect isn't going to necessarily change hearts, but the people of God acting as the people of God in communities all around this country will bring about a lot more substantive change than any election.

Jesus says something very similar. Here's what he says. This is John 17. Jesus put it this way in verse 13 and following. He says, "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."

The word sanctified is a word that means to be set apart and by extension, it means to be conformed to the image of Christ. To be sanctified by truth means that you take in the truth in such a way that it sets you apart. And this is where maybe you've heard this phrase be in but not of the world. It comes from Jesus' prayer here. And what he's basically saying is, here's what I want for my people. I want my people to live in the world, engaged in the world, but not of the world's values.

But here's what can happen. People who are followers of Jesus can be of the world and in the world where they just fully embrace the philosophy of the world, and they're part of the world system. And what Jesus is basically saying here is my prayer is that that wouldn't be true. Some people will be of the world, but not in the world. And this is kind of the idea that says I pull out of the world from a visible standpoint. I stand back, but I'm adopting and living all of the world's values. And this is really hypocrisy. And then there's some who will say, well, I'm not in the world and I'm not of the world. This is just withdrawal. Jesus says, what I want is I want people who will be sanctified by my truth and be in the world system, but not of the world's values because that will create this alternate city, and that will be the kind of linen belt that isn't worthless.

So, what does that mean for you and for me? Well, it means at a minimum that I would be able to come and say my righteousness is not from my goodness or even keeping the standard of God, but from Jesus Christ. And Jesus is my authority, and my life is about more

than just my own comfort or outcome. And when a group of people start to say, that's who we are, that's what we're about, the group identity becomes this alternate city within the broader community.

You know what troubled me most about the debate around that Super Bowl ad was that people, especially kind of more on the right, started saying how dare they? Because they're making Jesus comfortable with people who aren't followers of Jesus. And I understand the debate. I fully get that in a 30-second commercial, the whole gospel wasn't explained perfectly, and some people might kind of walk away going, so Jesus is okay with anything. I get that argument.

But if you read your Bible, who did Jesus come for? Do you know what it says? What it actually says? He didn't come for those who are well but for the sinners. Who did Jesus rile up? It was the religious people who got annoyed with him hanging out with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. And if a church community, a Christian community, isn't the kind of community that has some people that religious people aren't comfortable with, then they probably aren't actually teaching the message of Jesus. And so, what you have, at least in part here, is you have a bunch of religious people being like, oh, we shouldn't do this kind of thing because it makes it... And again, you can debate that. I'm not saying don't debate it, but what I'm saying is the heart of Jesus is to say, I want people who are so into my authority, into their need for a savior, and into my mission that they are distinct in this world. And what you get sometimes is people who say, I'm so good and somebody can come join me if they want and be like me. And then they wonder why Christians and the church are no more effective in their testimony to the world than Israel.

Some of us might have kids, and we're wondering if our kids will follow kind of the path we followed. Maybe we have friends or spouses, and we wish they would embrace what we've embraced. And certainly, there are multiple factors for why anything happens. But sometimes this isn't just a global issue. This can be a very personal issue that if you want to pass on your faith to somebody else in your life, when they see you acknowledging your brokenness and need for a savior instead of trying to convince everybody else in a passionate debate why they should think just like you, while fully acknowledging the authority of God and bending your knee and saying, I live for something more. There's something winsome about that. And there's something repelling when somebody just talks at us and says this is how you should think.

Now again, I like debates. I'm all for trying to understand what the Scripture teaches in its fullness. But you can lose the mission that God has given you, even in your own family and with people closest to you because of your desire to be right rather than your desire to point people to the God who is the pursuer of people all over this world.

Maybe today you've been burned by church people. Maybe just the ethereal church that you say, I'm not sure. Or maybe you've always thought that Christianity was about your performance. But even this linen belt story shows us that the goodness of God through Jesus Christ ultimately is where we get cleansed and where our hope is. And to the degree we embrace that, that is winsome in the world. And that's the invitation, and the lesson of the linen belt.

God, I pray today that you would help me to set aside the places where I am tempted to be self-righteous, to set aside the areas where I'm tempted to be my own authority, or where I want just my own ends and instead turn towards you, fully return to you. I pray that for each person who's here, each person who will listen in the future, that you would draw us to yourself, to your heart, and in that draw others. Because people in this age, the church, are your plan. We are your plan, the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. And so, I ask that that would be true. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.