

"Get Out of Your Own Way"

Do you ever have a particular line from a song stick with you? I was driving to Orlando one day, probably a couple of years ago when I heard a song by U2, from the Songs of Experience Album. Men (especially pastors) of a certain age like U2. The title, and chorus of the song was "*get out of your own way.*" The song seems to talk about a lot of things, but it was mostly just that line that stuck with me. So I had Bono in my head giving me that advice: *get out of your own way.* The phrase has a sort of down-to-earth common-sense quality to it. We understand what it means – the idea that much of the time we're what's really in the way. This is not to say that we don't face real obstacles, injustices, and struggles, or even enemies. But it stresses that fact that in meeting our inevitable challenges we are often hindered by our own stuff. *We cannot control the circumstances of life. We cannot control the people who impact our lives. What we can do, by God's grace, is we can learn more and more to get out of our own way so that we can more fully experience the life to which God calls us.* This series is about finding life in Christ. The biggest impediment to finding life in Christ is not going to be your circumstances or other people. It is going to be your own inner life and the choices you make.

This passage, **Jeremiah 2:12-13**, is especially helpful because it captures the heart of the issue in a few poetic images. Jeremiah was a prophet speaking to God's people as they were falling farther and farther away from God. Their lives were falling apart; their nation was falling apart. God, through Jeremiah, was calling them back to himself. **Jeremiah 2** is the first of several messages Jeremiah brought to reveal to the people why their lives were falling apart. The critical issue is what faces all of us. Listen to **Jeremiah 2:12-13** *Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, ¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

I love the poetry and imagery of the Bible but to strip it away for a moment and to state the point clearly

**I. THE PROBLEM WE ARE CREATING FOR OURSELVES IS THIS:
WE KEEP PUTTING OUR HOPE IN BROKEN CISTERNS.**

Consider the imagery here in Jeremiah. God is the fountain of living waters. His sufficiency to meet all our deepest needs, and thirsts and to satisfy us is repeatedly taught in the Bible. But our twofold sin is that we tend to repeatedly forsake God, the fountain of living water, and dig for ourselves broken cisterns that cannot hold water. The words "broken cisterns" are a metaphor, a symbol for anything we turn to instead of God in our search for fulfillment. A fountain or spring is a constant source of water that wells up and overflows. A cistern is just a hole that you dig that catches the rain. In Jeremiah's image, the cisterns we dig are not only dependent on the circumstances (rain), but they are broken cisterns so that even when the conditions are good, our broken cisterns don't hold water. So the whole image is about where you find life - water. It's the same idea when Jesus says, I am the water of life, or I am the bread of life, or I'm the vine, and you are the branches. **Your primary and most fundamental responsibility is to stay connected to the fountain, to keep drinking up the water of life.** That is more foundational than what you do for Christ because it is the foundation for all you do for him.

A. The beauty and power of this imagery is that it gets right down to the underlying issue in all of our lives.

Stephen Charnock, who lived in the 1600s wrote a classic book titled: *The Existence and Attributes of God*. In it he said,

"[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor, the incontinent man of his lust, the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chief good and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts ... All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like.... When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main 'idol'] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets, which bring supply... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort....

We could substitute the idea of "broken cistern" for a golden calf in that quote. To change the image again, when John the Baptist began to preach to prepare the way for Christ, he said, *"Now, its time to lay the ax to the root of the tree."* In other words, to get down to the underlying root issue. This is it for so much of life.

B. The challenge with broken cisterns is whether we are willing to honestly see where we have them and to truly turn from them.

The reason I tell stories is not to entertain but to illustrate. Jack Miller tells a story that I like because it demonstrates how subtle our broken cisterns can be and how they related to everyday close-to-the-heart issues. Jack was a pastor who had a profound influence on me. Connie and I had dinner with him only once, but I read his books. One of them, titled *"Come Back Barbara,"* is the story of one of his daughters who lived a seriously and blatantly sinful life. This pastor's daughter ran off and became the girlfriend of a drug kingpin. She was running around in outrageous furs, and green jaguars, and here are this pastor and his wife at home praying about it. The book is powerful because at a certain point, Jack and his wife, Rose Marie, sat down and spent some time thinking about who Jesus was to them. It was then that they forgave their daughter Barbara for the incredible humiliation and embarrassment that she was causing them.

Jack Miller used to say one of the problems with the book was that people would come to him and say, *"You know this is not a very helpful book to me because you say you saw how bitter and angry you were getting and you forgave your daughter. I'm having the same experience with my child, but I've tried, and I cannot forgive my rebellious child for the incredible pain they have caused me. You must just be a more spiritual person than me."*

Jack explained they had missed the point. Jack's daughter's rebellion, which was undeniably bad and understandably sad, had an effect way beyond sad. It ripped apart the real source of all of his satisfaction and security in life. His daughter's rebellion revealed the truth about his pride in reputation that was, in fact, a broken cistern. What enabled him to truly forgive is that he owned it. He recognized that reason he was bitter was not just because she was doing bad things but because, even though Jack believed in Christ as his Savior, the way he tried to measure up was by being a good father and pastor. His reputation was a broken cistern he had been hewing out for years. He realized he had been thinking, *"You know I'm a pretty good person because I am a good father and pastor. I've raised my children well and look at how many of them have turned out great."* When one of them turned out bad, it tore apart what had become the source of his life and happiness. What he had to say was *"Lord, I see now that the reason I am so angry at Barbara is because my reputation as a father has become too important to me. It has become an idol (broken cistern) in*

my life. I give that up, and I'm sorry. You are my only true source of life and righteousness." It was only as he came back to Christ as the fountain of life that he was able to forgive from the heart.

He said parents in similar situations read the book but did so kind of superficially then tried to forgive but said they couldn't. The reason they couldn't is because they didn't understand what released Jack and Rose-Marie from the bondage of their bitterness was seeing and honestly facing how much this broken cistern dynamic was at the heart of their struggle to love. Their daughter's life-choices made them look bad, feel bad, and question themselves. And as long as they lived for reputation and pride, they could *try* to forgive, but they were trapped in their bitterness. Only when they renounced that need for their daughter's respect and for reputation and recognized it all as broken cisterns and went back to God as the fountain of living water, only then, were they set free to deeply forgive.

So that story is not *just* about forgiveness it is about broken cisterns and the inevitable way they hurt life in God. That's a story about the underlying issue that applies to every struggle, temptation, and trial we face. The circumstances of life and the actions of other people can hurt you but they cannot keep you from drawing strength from the fountain of living water. We get in our own way. We tend to obsess about how to fix our problems or fix other people, but we have to first remember our foundational and primary responsibility, without which we can do nothing well or wisely, is to stay connected to the fountain of living water. So we have to look at ourselves. Are you willing to do that? In the song "get out of your own way" there is a line that Bono repeatedly sings, he says, *"I can help you, but it's your fight, your fight... get out of your own way."*

If the twofold sin is to forsake God and hew out broken cisterns that hold no water, then the thing to do is this:

II. FORSAKE YOUR BROKEN CISTERNS SO YOU CAN HOLD FAST TO GOD AS THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER.

Three things can help us to do that....

A. To clearly see the utter futility of our broken cisterns.

The Hebrew word translated broken is often translated "smashed" or "shattered." They are shattered cisterns. The idea is not just that they have a slow leak, but they really don't ever hold water.

From the beginning of humanity the struggle has been to receive the good gifts of God with gratitude but to not allow them to take the place of God as the source of our life. Good things like marriage, children, relationships, community, work, respect, security, and family... all these things and all kinds of things are to be enjoyed. You can want them. You can work for them. You can pray about them. But are they the fountain of living water? No. There is no strategy you can adopt for making life right, no persona you can present, or coping mechanism you can adopt that will be for your source of life.

Not only do broken cisterns fail to satisfy you – they weaken you. To the degree that you live for broken cisterns – you will be frustrated and thirsty because they are broken, shattered. To the degree that you are frustrated and thirsty, you will be vulnerable to quick fixes and short cuts and other appealing shattered cisterns. To the degree that you pursue your life in God as the fountain of living water and learn to enjoy his unceasing love and relentless grace you will be in a place of resilient strength and fullness and better able to not only rejoiced in God but live for him. You will still be an imperfect person in a fallen world, but you will have a hidden source of strength. And, whatever you have to do or face you will do better.

The story I shared last week has a conclusion I never got to. What I discovered was that when I repenting of being a pastor addicted to the achievements and to the approval of people (my broken cistern) and began to find my life more fully in God – I did a better job, and I think I ended up pleasing people more when I needed to less. As I began to respond to people, no longer out of a need for their affirmation, but out of the fullness of life in God I still worked hard and made sacrifices, and appreciated affirmation when I received it but there was a difference, a joy, and a peace, that sustained me and blessed others . I wasn't engaged in a futile effort to be filled I was doing it a little more freely out of the fullness of God. I got out of my own way. I'm still learning where I need to do that and how to this day.

The first thing that helps me forsake my broken cisterns is seeing how futile they are. They are broken cisterns. The second thing?

B. To clearly see the evil of your broken cisterns.

The prophet says be appalled, be shocked, *my people have committed two evils*. The Hebrew word "evil" means it is not only wicked; it is destructive. Strong words.

I remember a Saturday night – I'm going to say it was somewhere around 1980, I had finally finished my sermon and had moved on to printing out the bulletins on the mimeograph machine. I don't remember how but a Scripture came to mind. **Isaiah 53:3**, *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* I had a moment of clarity - that came in an instant – it takes more time to explain it than it did to experience it. I saw that this was exactly how I was treating Jesus.

He was despised by me and I esteemed him not. In the scale of my joy, emotions, and fulfillment it was as if all my other wants and wishes and desire to achieve and be appreciated that all weighed a ton but God, Jesus, his sacrifice, his care, his love, that didn't register at all. He was showing me his gracious, compassionate, glorious face, offering me himself, but I hid my face from him as I turned to chase what I thought I needed. I esteemed him not. When I saw that it hit me; what I was doing wasn't just futile, it was evil.

It is evil because it is so entitled and ungrateful toward God. It is infidelity to the truest love; God's sacrificial, unconditional love in Christ. It is also evil because it spills over into dark emotions and bad behavior. It is evil because it so grips you that you do not live in the freedom of sons and daughters of God. You will never fully discover who God wants you to be, what he can do through you, or how he might use you until you let go of those shattered cisterns to find life in Christ. To see that bondage to our broken cisterns it is evil can help you to break free, to let go and to come back to God and to get out of your own way.

The third thing that helps is

C. To keep longing for the living water, only God can give.

God is saying to you: *"I want you to find in me and my love and truth a gladness that gives you strength. I want you to find your peace and joy and hope and purpose in me. Until I make all things new, this life will confront you with many challenges, and you will grieve, and you will hurt, but you will never be abandoned or alone. I am with you. I am with you as a constant companion as close as your deepest thoughts and feeling. I love you and gave myself for you on the cross to be your Savior, I rose again, and I am your Lord. I will never let you go. I want you to find your strength and inspiration and peace and purpose in me by trusting in my love, practicing my presence, and believing in my promises all the time."*

Your primary and most fundamental responsibility is to stay connected to the fountain, to keep drinking up the water of life.

CONCLUSION

The gospel means good news. It is good news because it meets a real need. Our sins separated us from God. They deserve his judgment and even condemnation. But the God news is that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him. He went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Everything his holy justice demanded he satisfied in his sacrificial death for us. He rose again to be our Lord and the source of our lives. You do not earn the gift of life and love he freely gives. He paid for you simply receive it. It's by faith alone. You turn to Christ and trust in him. When you do, God comes into your life with grace and offers you himself. Do not forsake him for any shattered cistern. Get your life from him. Sink your heart into his grace and love.

As we close use the prayer of response, we offer you to encourage your own personal response to him as we pray together.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Lord, you are the fountain of living water. I confess that I have too often failed to believe and live as if you are the fountain of living water for me. My emotions and temptations have often revealed how little I feed my heart on your love and grace. I have depended instead on other things. But I have ignored these warnings and persisted in my foolishness. I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I fully believed and yet, through Christ, more loved and accepted than I dared to hope. I thank you that Christ paid for all these sins on the cross and rose again as Savior and Lord. I turn and trust in him and ask that I may continually turn from every false source of life to you the fountain of living water.