Return to Me

From the Harlot City to the Holy City

Rob Massie

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Not Legislative: Relational

Our songs this morning kept emphasizing the relational aspects of the God we serve, the King we serve through Jesus Christ. And those relationships counteract any idea we might carry that the bond between us and God is essentially legislative: that life is a series of dos and don'ts, and if we do, we're in favor, and if we don't, we're out. Those aspects exist, but in a very different way than we tend to imagine.

When Paul says we are not under the law, that does not mean there are no laws governing the relationship between us and our God, or between us and the rest of humanity. We live in a world where without laws there would be chaos. The laws Paul says we are no longer under are the laws that separated people from people, and that separated God from people. Laws that said a Jew could not eat with a Gentile because of kosher restrictions; those were eliminated. Laws that said you could not do certain things on certain days, when those things kept fellowship from happening; those were eliminated. Laws that confined the worship of God to one location, where the ark was, where the standing priesthood served; those were done away with in Christ Jesus.

When you start to see which laws were done away with and which were retained, the pattern is straightforward. The laws that kept you at a distance (distance from God, distance from each other) those were done away with. Most of us in the room would have been Gentiles in the

old order. We would not have been allowed past the Court of the Gentiles, which, incidentally, is precisely where they were buying and selling sacrificial animals when Jesus came in and overturned the tables. “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations,” he said, quoting Isaiah, “and you have made it a den of thieves.” The temple grift was happening in the only space outsiders had access to. That was the offense.

So the relationship between us and God is not legislative; it is relational. And the Hebrew Scriptures, written by Israel under Moses, used a striking range of images for that relationship. Israel was God’s child: “Let My son go.” In Hosea, Israel is God’s wife. The relationship is layered: father and child, king and subject, husband and wife. As we sang earlier this morning, “You are my friend, You are my brother, even though You are my King,” and then, “My heart pants after You; I love You more than any other.” Friend, brother, king, husband. The mystery the New Testament unfolds is that God has a Son who steps into all of those roles (king, priest, husband) that the Father had borne toward Israel.

Jeremiah on a Friday Morning

Friday morning, in a setting where I lead a study, I asked the men what they wanted to look at. One of them said, “Jeremiah. Talk to us about Jeremiah.” My first response was, “Jeremiah? At seven a.m.? Really?” But almost the moment we opened the book, my mind exploded with this incredible Person we have come into contact with: his mercy, his love, the relationship he wants to have with us.

As I have been saying for several weeks now, drawing from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, God’s desire for a household (his desire to be with us, to be in relationship with us) is greater than our desire for him. “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You” (Psalm 42:1). That is real. But greater than our desire is his. His desire is the desire that

created all things. Once you start to see how strong his desire actually is, our desire for him begins to look pitiful by comparison.

Jeremiah 3 sets the stage. God has Jeremiah ask:

> Will you not from this time cry to Me, "My Father, You are the guide of my youth"? Will He remain angry forever? Will He keep it to the end? Behold, you have spoken and done evil things, as you were able. (Jeremiah 3:4–5)

Israel was looking to God in the language of relationship. They were saying, in effect, "He's our Father. Yes, he said he's going to give us a whooping. But will he really stay angry forever?" It's the posture of children in the back seat of the car on the long drive home, knowing a spanking is waiting at the door. You curl up and pretend to be asleep. Nobody wants to spank a sleeping child.

"Will He remain angry forever?" That's not the cry of strangers. That's the cry of children who know the Father's heart. And here is the indictment: they knew his heart, and they kept playing him anyway. They kept doing evil in the face of his goodness.

On Atheists, Dawkins, and the God of Slow Mercy

The big indictment that the atheist or the agnostic (or honestly, even some Christians) bring against God is that he is fundamentally an angry God. "How could you serve a God who annihilates people?" Richard Dawkins has made a career out of cataloging the misogyny, the infanticide, the genocidal tendencies he finds attributed to this God. "How could I serve a God like that?"

If I had a minute with Mr. Dawkins, I would say: the things you keep gravitating to are not the true nature and character of God. The true nature and character of God is the prolonged, sustained mercy that comes long before any of the judgment scenes you cite. Judgment is not the

first word of God. It is the very last word, after an extended period of "return to Me, return to Me, return to Me." And when judgment finally falls, it falls almost exclusively on the persistent abusers of the weak, the innocent, and the marginalized, those who refuse to repent after God has given them every opportunity. We will see this clearly before we are through.

The Honeymoon and the Harlot

Jeremiah 2 frames the relationship in marital terms:

> Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, "Thus says the Lord: I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holiness to the Lord, the firstfruits of His increase." (Jeremiah 2:1–3)

God says, in effect: I remember the time when we became married, the honeymoon, when I delivered you out of Egypt and brought you to myself in the wilderness. We were celebrating our covenant together. You committed to me at Sinai. I committed to you. We made a bond of love, and anyone who came between us would meet disaster.

That is the language of strong love. When you love someone deeply (a parent for a child, a spouse for a spouse) how long would you tolerate someone abusing them? What would your response be to deception, to harm? You would be moved with anger. Your words would not be neutral. They would be words of judgment. Of course they would. Do we serve a God who sets all things right? Absolutely. And for those who refuse to engage in love with him and persist in hurting others, that final setting-right is what they have to look forward to. But notice how Jeremiah keeps framing the indictment:

> "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me, have followed idols, and have become idolaters?" (Jeremiah 2:5).

Instead of whole-hearted devotion, they turned to other gods, the gods of the nations. (I have been struck for over a year now by 1 Samuel 8, where Israel had spent four hundred years living under judges, and then suddenly they want a king "like all the nations." Their hearts had begun to drift. They wanted the nations' kings, then the nations' gods, then the nations' loyalties.) Jeremiah catches the same drift:

"Has a nation changed its gods, which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory for what does not profit" (Jeremiah 2:11).

They had a name change. They had been married. They made covenant. And now their eye has wandered, and they have moved out of God's house and into someone else's. Then comes one of the great images of the Old Testament:

"For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Imagine clean alpine snowmelt: the water coming down off the Sierra Crest, crisp and cold. (Boil it first these days; we know about parasites. But pretend, for the sake of the picture, you don't.) That is what they walked away from. And what did they trade it for? A muddy cistern, scooped out of the ground, leaking, full of silt. They were lowering a dipper into stagnant water and drinking. "You've forsaken Me, and this is where you've gone."

Jeremiah names where, exactly, they have gone:

"And now why take the road to Egypt, to drink the waters of Sihor? Or why take the road to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River?" (Jeremiah 2:18).

"The River," capital R, is the Euphrates. They have walked back to the very nations God once delivered them from, and they are kneeling at those waters now.

“You Cannot Wash Yourself”

By verse 22, Jeremiah says they are degenerate. Verse 20: “You were a noble vine, but you have become the degenerate plant of an alien vine to Me.” Every one of us was planted as a noble vine; every opportunity of being a child of God lay open. And we became degenerate plants. And God keeps asking us to come back.

“‘For though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, your iniquity is marked before Me,’ says the Lord God” (Jeremiah 2:22).

Have you ever felt the guilty stain of sin? Felt the uncleanness, the sense that nothing could make you whole again? “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” That song is sound theology. Israel scrubbed and scrubbed and could not get clean. Why? Verse 25 tells us:

“But you said, ‘There is no hope. No! For I have loved aliens, and after them I will go’” (Jeremiah 2:25).

We can give our hearts to other things. And then verse 26: as a thief is ashamed when he is found out, so is the house of Israel ashamed, they, their kings, their princes, their priests, and their prophets. Instead of saying to God, “You are my Father,” they say to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave birth to me.” They have turned to created things. Paul says it the same way in Romans 1: they exchanged the glory of God for things made.

Somebody has to talk this way, because of what is happening in our culture. Our culture is minimizing sin. We are being formed by an air that says: what’s good for you is good for you, what’s good for me is good for me; there is no demarcation between darkness and light; if it is light to you, it is light to you. Postmodernity collapses the categories and calls the collapse

generosity. But Jeremiah will not let us collapse the categories. He keeps using the marriage image because adultery is precisely the category we are dealing with.

"Yet Return to Me"

Jeremiah 3 opens with a rhetorical question grounded in the Mosaic law:

> "They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?' Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me," says the Lord. (Jeremiah 3:1)

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 says no: once a divorced woman has gone to another man, she cannot return to her first husband. Moses calls it an abomination; he says the land would be polluted. Jeremiah knows the law. Israel knows the law. And then comes the line that breaks the form:

> "You have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me."

God is going to violate his own command? He is going to absorb the shame of the abomination himself, for the sake of relationship? That is the move. That is the gospel in seed form.

He will not let it go. The whole rest of chapter 3 and the opening of chapter 4 are God trying to woo Israel back. Verse 12:

> Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: 'Return, backsliding Israel,' says the Lord; 'I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,' says the Lord; 'I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God . . .' (Jeremiah 3:12–13)

And then:

"'Return, O backsliding children,' says the Lord; 'for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion'" (Jeremiah 3:14).

"I am married to you." The covenant has not been dissolved. "One from a city, two from a family," even if you have been scattered to the corners of the earth in your unfaithfulness, I will go and gather you back.

"Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings" (Jeremiah 3:22).

And here Jeremiah turns the corner. The return is not a return to the old religious furniture. The temple has been burned. The priesthood has been disbanded. The ark has gone missing. ("That's why Indiana Jones went looking for it.") Verse 15:

"And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15).

Knowledge and understanding give us the wisdom to stay on the road that leads home. And then this stunning sentence:

> "Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days," says the Lord, "that they will say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore." (Jeremiah 3:16)
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> They are not going to rebuild it. Nobody is even going to think about it. Why? Verse 17:
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> At that time Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the Lord, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem. No more shall they follow the dictates of their evil hearts. (Jeremiah 3:17)

Something is going to happen: There will be no temple, only the throne. The presence will not be confined to a sanctuary. Hold that thought; we will pick it up in Revelation.

Revelation 4: The Throne in the Middle of the Idolatry

That song the redeemed sing ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty") comes in Revelation 4. It is sandwiched between two scenes that ought to give the church pause. In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus walks among the seven churches and names in each one a heart of corruption that looks remarkably similar to the heart of corruption named in Revelation 17 and 18. The harlot Babylon is guilty of the very things the seven churches are guilty of. That is not an accidental parallel.

And right in the middle of the church's idolatry, there is a throne in heaven, and the cry is "Holy, holy, holy." Even in the midst of our unfaithfulness, the God who sits on that throne has a plan for our redemption. Revelation 5 asks the question: who is worthy to open the scroll and reveal that plan? John weeps because no one is found worthy in heaven, on earth, or under the earth. And then he is told:

"Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Revelation 5:5).

And he turns to look, and what does he see? Not a lion. He sees a Lamb, looking as though it had been slain. And every nation and tribe and tongue and people sing:

"You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

"That He Might Sanctify and Cleanse Her"

So when we move to the New Testament, we begin to see how everything that was happening in Israel is going to be undone in Jesus. The marital language of Jeremiah finds its consummation in Ephesians 5. Paul writes:

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25–27)

Jeremiah said the harlot tried to wash herself and could not get clean. Paul says: Christ does the washing. He does it with water and with the Word. The cross we will commemorate next Sunday is the act by which the husband cleanses the unfaithful bride, and not just the bride of Israel, but Israel and all her partners. That is the mystery: It is not only Israel God ends up saving, but all of those Israel ran off with.

Paul then quotes Genesis 2:24 ("For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh") and adds:

> "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32).

Stop on that. From the very beginning, every man and woman who has ever gotten married has been prophesying. Every marriage points forward to the ultimate marriage, the redemption of humanity to its King. Every couple at every altar is an unintentional sermon about Christ and his bride. None of us gets it perfectly right; no marriage fully embodies what it points to. But Paul's word to the church is: through the Spirit, you are now to exemplify to the world what is going to be consummated at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Live it out now.

Jezebel in the Pews

Look at one example of how Revelation indicts the church before it indicts the world. To Thyatira, Jesus says:

> Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual

> immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. (Revelation 2:20–21)

That language is not accidental. The same characteristics that we will read of in the great harlot of Revelation 17 are already operating inside the church. This is why I am not in the business of wagging my finger at the world. “Naughty, naughty” never saved anybody. The real power is when the church begins to be the church Jesus is washing, water by the Word, and begins to live out the life he has called us to in this world. According to Ephesians 3, that lived life is itself an apologetic to the principalities and powers. They look at it and say, “My God, if Jew and Gentile can be one in this thing called the church, maybe even we could become part of that.”

She Sits on Many Waters

Revelation 17 opens this way:

> Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication. (Revelation 17:1–2)

Notice the imagery. Israel, when small, ran after the nations. Now the unfaithful one, Babylon, sits on many waters herself. Verse 15 tells us what those waters are:

“The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:15).

People are the battleground. Will they be drawn into faithlessness, or will they be part of the faithful people of God whom God will ultimately redeem? That is what is on the line. Whose name will be written on your forehead? The name of the Father, written on the foreheads of the faithful (Revelation 22:4)? The new name no one knows but the one who receives it (Revelation

2:17)? Or the mark of the beast (Revelation 13)? Which name will you bear? What home will you live in? Which road will you walk? Which water will you drink?

Because we will drink. We will walk down some road. We will take on some name. We cannot help it. We are people who become marked by what we look at and worship most. Whatever gets our attention will eventually get us. That is how we are wired.

And notice what the harlot has done with the kings of the earth: “with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication.” Sin is no longer a source of shame. Sin has become a source of celebration. Does that sound familiar? Where sin has been turned into celebration, we need a few commands again. We need a few guardrails to keep us on the road that leads home. Without them, we will be deceived by every wind of doctrine and by every cunning sleight of those who lie in wait to deceive. They will take our children. They will take our loves. They will take our relationships. They will destroy them. And ultimately they will damage the relationship we have with our God.

Revelation 17 says the woman is arrayed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls. Her power has been used to take. Revelation 18 spells out the trafficking, and it is trafficking, all the way down to the final indictment of verse 13: “and bodies and souls of men.” There is nothing worse than human trafficking. In a world where women are not valued equally with men, the consequences are catastrophic: abortion of female infants, abduction, sale, and the demographic distortions that follow. The harlot’s wealth is built on bodies.

“Come Out of Her, My People”

Revelation 18 begins:

“Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!” (Revelation 18:2).

If you are not careful, you forget where you came from. The grace of God will eventually find that woman and turn her into the bride we will see in Revelation 19 and 21. We might think she only needed a light version of grace to be folded into that bride. We will see in a moment that what was needed was a full one. But notice what comes next:

“Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues” (Revelation 18:4).

God gave the church space to repent. He gave Jezebel space to repent. He has given the nations space to repent, thousands upon thousands of years of mercy. That is how long-suffering he is. And still the cry is, “Come out of her, my people.”

But come out, to where? Where do we go when the seven churches have a Babylon in them too? That is the question, and Revelation answers it not by telling us where to flee but by showing us what God is doing.

Beguiled From the Simplicity of Christ

Revelation 19:2 says God’s judgments are true and righteous, “because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication.” This is no longer just Israel under indictment. This is humanity. We are all Adam. We are all Eve. Adam and Eve had been called to whole-hearted devotion to one another and to God. They were to keep covenant. The serpent beguiled them. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

> For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the

> serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:2–3)

"I have espoused you to one husband." Then he sees what is happening in Corinth (the temple prostitutes, the lawsuits between believers, the Gentile-style behaviors creeping in) and he writes back: don't do that. I have espoused you to Christ. Be faithful to him. But I fear, like Eve.

Notice when Eve was deceived. Before the consummating moment. Before Cain and Abel. Before the union that fulfilled the marriage. Eve was deceived from the simplicity of God's command. Adam was deceived. The original command was simple: you may eat of every tree of the garden, except this one. By the time Eve quotes it back to the serpent, it has grown: "You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die." How often do we add to the command of God? God gives us commands to maintain relationship. We tend to add to them, for whatever reasons of our own.

The Bride Receives, the Harlot Takes

Then Revelation 19:7 sounds the antiphon to Revelation 17:

> "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. (Revelation 19:7–8)

The great harlot adorns herself by taking. The bride is adorned by being given to. "To her it was granted." The fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints, but even those acts are gift, not achievement.

The goal of the Christian walk has never been merely the forgiveness of sins. The goal is a transformed spirit. The goal is becoming people who can be equally yoked with the Lamb. That is what we have been called into.

The City Without a Temple

The promise through Jeremiah was, “Return to me. Return to Zion. Return to Jerusalem. I want you in my house with my name.” Revelation 21 closes the loop:

> Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.” (Revelation 21:2–3)

God prepares. God adorns. He is taking his Son, the Lamb, and bringing his daughter (drawn out of all the nations, all peoples) and joining them. Verse 7 says:

“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7).

Father language. And then verse 9:

“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife’” (Revelation 21:9).

Father, husband, the multifaceted relationship of the Hebrew Scriptures finally clear. We have a Father; we have a Husband; the Son of God has become the Husband of the redeemed world.

And the bride, like Babylon, is a city. God has reached into Babylon and drawn out everyone who would come (“one from a city, two from a family”) and brought them home. The faithless city has been transfigured into the holy city descending out of heaven.

Then comes the surprise of all surprises:

> But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. (Revelation 21:22–26)

Jeremiah said: don’t try to rebuild the ark; don’t even let it enter your mind. Now we know why. There is no temple in the city, because God himself is sitting in the middle of it.

And, surprise of all surprises, the very thing that drew our hearts away from God in the first place, the nations and their gods, those nations come walking into the city, bringing their glory and honor in. The political confidences we wandered after (Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, the United States, Russia) all those allegiances we built up while we were unfaithful, even those get redeemed. Even our lovers come back into the house.

Stop and feel that for a second. That shocks the fire out of me. Who among us, if betrayed, would build an extra room on the house for the partners our spouse had run off with? It does not seem right. It is not how we operate. But this is the redemptive plan of God, that even our unfaithfulness gets gathered up into the redemption. Where the great harlot had a worldwide faithlessness, the Lamb has a worldwide faithfulness. Isaiah said, “The earth shall be full of the

knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). God redeems this thing. God wins.

This is not a small remnant of hand-wringing people building high walls in our city to keep the infidels out. We leave the gates open, and they come in, and they are saved.

The Final Word

So we serve a great God. If anyone comes to you and says, "I will not serve a God of judgment," tell them this: judgment is the final word God speaks to a stubborn person who absolutely refuses to come home, who absolutely insists on continuing to abuse others rather than being loved by the One who calls them. It is the final word. But the first, and the second, and the third, and the seventieth-times-seven, those words are all "Return to Me. Return, O faithless Israel. Come home. Come home."

That's all I have to say about that.