

## Talismans and Slogans

**[Slide 1]** When I was a little kid, I had a good luck charm: a rabbit's foot. I kept it on a keychain. Another word for a good luck charm is a "**talisman**". A talisman is something that you or I invest our trust in. It's something we think will bring us good luck or keep us safe from bad luck or evil.

I thought that my lucky rabbit's foot would bring me good luck and keep me safe. Today, we might sneer at that idea (even me). We might think we would never believe something as silly as that. But maybe we shouldn't be so quick to *judge*. Maybe we don't walk around with a literal good luck charm in our pockets. **But is it possible we have some talismans of our own? Things we invest our trust in.**

**[Slide 2]** Speaking of judging: When I was a teenager, I had a type of **slogan** that I lived by. I got it from one of my idols in life. I thought of it or said it a lot: "**Only God can judge me.**" Anyone ever heard that before? I even thought very seriously about getting that tattooed on my body—I believed in it that much.

But that slogan, as pious as it might have sounded to me as a teenager, was actually my excuse to do anything I wanted.

I committed crimes and said, "*Only God can judge me.*"

I mistreated people and said, "*Only God can judge me.*"

I could shrug off any sense of shame for my actions by telling myself, "*Only God can judge me.*" **I'm sure I'm the only one here who's ever justified my sins with pious-sounding language, right? No one else here has ever done that, right?**

**[Slide 3]** This morning, we're going to look at a passage in the book of Jeremiah as part of our sermon series: **Jeremiah: Prophet to God's People in Crisis**. The passage we're going to look at today is called Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon," because in the text the LORD commanded Jeremiah to preach the word he received from God to the people of Judah at the gate of the temple.

In this text, we're going to see that the people of Judah had invested an **institution** and an **idea** with **idolatrous trust** and had used that institution to **mask their guilt** and used a **slogan to justify their injustice**. So, I've entitled this message "**Talismans and Slogans.**" **[Slide 4]**

But, before we dive into the text, would you pray with me?

**Heavenly Father,**

**Thank you for this opportunity to look into the scriptures together in worship.**

**Thank you for your word, which you have spoken through the prophets.**

**May your word go forth today like a seed scattered by the divine Sower, your Spirit. And may our hearts be good soil for it to take root and bear fruit.**

**Holy Spirit, I pray you would go before the word and prepare our hearts to receive it. Break up the fallow ground of our hearts. Give us hearts ready to hear and act.**

**In the matchless name of Jesus we pray.**

**Amen**

If you've got a translation of the Bible with you, you can turn to Jeremiah, chapter 7, starting in verse 1, or you can follow along on the slides projected behind me: **[Slide 5]**

<sup>1</sup> This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: <sup>2</sup> “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message: Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. <sup>3</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” [Slide 6] <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

[Slide 7] <sup>9</sup> Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.

[Slide 8] <sup>12</sup> Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. <sup>13</sup> While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. <sup>15</sup> I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

[Slide 9] <sup>16</sup> So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. <sup>17</sup> Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? <sup>18</sup> The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes to offer to the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to arouse my anger. <sup>19</sup> But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?

[Slide 10] <sup>20</sup> Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place—on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land—and it will burn and not be quenched.

<sup>21</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! <sup>22</sup> For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, [Slide 11] <sup>23</sup> but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. <sup>24</sup> But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. <sup>25</sup> From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now,

*day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. <sup>26</sup> But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.*

**[Slide 12]** <sup>27</sup> *When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. <sup>28</sup> Therefore say to them, 'This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.*

<sup>29</sup> *Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.*

This is a pretty dire prophecy. This tells us just how seriously God takes the sins of **idolatry** and **injustice**. Idolatry is failing to love God with our whole selves and injustice is failing to love our neighbor as ourselves. All sin is either a form of idolatry or injustice.

There are several things in this text we must not miss. We must not miss exactly **how** the Judahites fell into this **impending crisis** in the first place. Otherwise, we ourselves are in danger of the same fate.

At the center of this text are several important pieces we must be sure to get straight. Number one is **the Temple**. **[Slide 13]** This isn't just any old temple—this is the *one and only Temple of YHWH*. This is critical to understand. The ancient Near East was replete with temples dedicated to every god imaginable. Mostly, what ancient Near Eastern worshippers were concerned with was the Big Three: **[Slide 14] Money, Power, and Pleasure**. Or we could use ancient names that mean the same thing like **Mammon, Mars, and Aphrodite**. But, the Temple of YHWH is altogether different from those other temple and those other gods. Because YHWH isn't just a **means** for people to get money, power, and pleasure. **YHWH is the True and Living God**. YHWH isn't only interested in giving people the depraved desires of their hearts. No! YHWH is interested in the same thing YHWH has always been interested in since the beginning of Creation: **[Slide 15]** A world in which human beings reflect God's loving **care** for all creation and reflect back creation's **praises** to God—a world in which the creative love of God is **unhindered** and **untarnished** by the **distorting** and **corrupting** power of sin. YHWH's interest is to make the people of Israel a **microcosm** of the type of relationship God desires for all human beings. Through Abraham, Israel was chosen to be blessed so that they can be a blessing to all the people groups of the world.

But, by the time of Jeremiah, this was not at all what the temple had become. The Temple had become an institution that was purely to fulfill the depraved desires of the Judahites' hearts. Like all the other inhabitants of the ancient Near East, the Judahites were only interested in the Big Three: **Money, Power, and Pleasure**. They had forsaken the desires of YHWH, the True and Living God. **[Slide 16]**

<sup>22</sup> *For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, <sup>23</sup> but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. <sup>24</sup> But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward.*

The stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts had gotten so bad, they were even willing to perform the practice that was the most detestable to God: **child sacrifice**. YHWH abhorred child sacrifice. On Mount Moriah, God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac to **contrast** himself with the other gods of the ancient Near East who required child sacrifice. Instead of requiring a sacrifice, YHWH showed that he is a God who would **provide the sacrifice himself**.

But we should ask, **how did it get his bad for the Judahites?** Because if we're not careful, we too could begin down the same path and the self-indulgence of the stubborn inclinations of **our hearts** could lead us to **sacrifice everything in our lives on the proverbial altars of money, power, and pleasure**.

It all started for Judah with the **investment of their trust in the wrong places**.

[Slide 17]

*12 Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. 13 While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. 14 Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. 15 I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.'*

Do you see what God is accusing them of? They've placed their trust in a Building over and against the very **voice of the Builder!** God was calling them and they ignored him, because they had a building to trust in, instead of God. The institution of the Temple became a **talisman** for the Judahites. They reduced the Temple of YHWH to a **hideout**, a **refuge** where they could mask their shame. So YHWH commands Jeremiah to preach: [Slide 18]

*9 Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? 11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.*

Just as in Jesus's day, when Jesus himself protested the temple institution and quoted the prophet Jeremiah, [Slide 19]

*"It is written," [Jesus] said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" — Mt. 21.13 NIV*

Now, before you or I get a little too judgmental of the Judahites, shouldn't we ask ourselves if there are institutions in our lives in we place **our trust**, over and against the voice of God? **Shouldn't we be asking ourselves what are our Talismans?**

The reality is, each one of us, and all of us as a church, are tempted to place our trust in **institutions** and not in the **voice of God**. And there's a very simple reason why: **It's a whole lot easier!** It's very difficult to trust in the voice of God, because God is not

an **object we can control**. God is not even **someone we can see!** God is **invisible!** So, of course it's easier to place our trust in what we can see! Of course Judah was tempted to trust in the temple: the temple was **spectacular** to them. It was **tangible** to them. Its presence was **reassuring**.

You and I have the same problem they did. We are tempted every day to place our trust in what we can **see, taste, touch, and smell**, and not in the **Spirit of God** who, like the wind, blows wherever he chooses—who is like a **wild goose**, not a **canary in a cage**.

In the American church, marriage is an institution we often place our trust in over and against the voice of God. In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul teach Christians that **singleness is preferable to marriage**, so that our devotion to God can be undivided. But, in many American churches being married is the **most godly status imaginable**, and singleness is treated like a **disability** or a **character flaw**.

In the American Church, political parties and philosophies are institutions we place our trust in over and against the voice of God. **We place our trust in a partisan political platform on issues related to money, power, and pleasure rather than God's platform of justice for the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow.**

There are patriotic institutions in America we're in danger of investing our trust into every day: the federal government, the military, law enforcement, the list goes on and on. We have national rituals we are culturally expected to participate in which are **designed to train our hearts to trust in these institutions**.

We can even turn the **Bible** itself into a **talisman!** The very scriptures which point us to Christ, can become a stumbling block from trusting in Christ, if we invest all our trust in the letter over and against the Spirit! (It happens!)

But, in our text today, YHWH says all such **talismans** are idolatrous.

It's important to note that the Temple of YHWH was not an **evil** institution; it was an institution **commanded by God!** It was a very good and holy institution.

But even good things, like marriage or nations or even the Bible can become idolatrous when we place our trust in them over and against the voice of God. This is what the Lord says: **[Slide 20]**

*“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord.” — Jeremiah 17.5*

And the Psalmist says, **[Slide 21]**

*“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” — Psalm 20.7*

Or here's how Paul puts it: **[Slide 22]**

*“For we live by faith, not by sight.” — II Cor. 5.7*

One of the big challenges Judah was up against, was a powerful **marketing and PR campaign**. A slogan had been created that the people of Judah rallied around.

This slogan not only instilled trust in the institution of the Temple (**idolatry**), but it also justified their mistreatment of people (**injustice**). **[Slide 23]**

*<sup>3</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.*

“Trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.” I feel like this is such a timely text for where we are in America, in 2017. For the last few years, a phenomenon has occurred which is unprecedented. Because of the advent of the Web and social media, millions of people are now more susceptible than ever to deceptive words that are worthless. This has been dubbed “**Fake News**.”

Fake news is pervasive and influential because far too many of us are **addicted** to the pleasure of having our beliefs **confirmed**. It feels good to be right, and we get a high from it. It hurts to have our beliefs challenged—it causes actual pain in our minds when we experience **cognitive dissonance**. So, at all costs, we avoid experiencing the pain of having our beliefs challenged and we keep getting that fix of having our beliefs confirmed.

Even some “Bible-believing”, “Born-Again” Christians have invested their trust into being **Conservative** or **Progressive** more than being **obedient to YHWH!**  
*We’re tempted to invest our trust in being **RIGHT** more than being **JUST!***

Our text today teaches us to be **critical of our culture’s slogans**—the headlines that seek to deceive us into trusting them because they say what we want to hear.

Our text today teaches us to **interrogate our biases** and **view with skepticism** that which **reinforces our preconceived notions**.

Our text today teaches us to **be wary of cultural rallying cries that demand our allegiance and our faith**.

Our passage today warns us not to **invest our trust in talismans or slogans, but to trust in the Spirit of God**.

Our passage today does not mince words to the people of God. It says:

***Don’t think that your talismans and slogans will save you if you reject the foreigner or immigrant among you!***

***Don’t think your talismans and slogans will save you if you oppress minorities among you!***

***Don’t think your talismans and slogans will protect you from judgment if you neglect the poor and abuse the vulnerable!***

YHWH says judgment is coming on the people of God for their idolatry and injustice.

The American church has had prophets sent to her—prophets who have preached the word of God to her. **How did we do with that? Did we heed their voices?**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet sent to the American Church to speak the Word of God. Here's something he wrote, **over 50 years ago**: [Slide 24]

“There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’

[Slide 25] But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven,’ called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. [Slide 26] Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.” — Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

### ***How has the American church done at responding to that word from God?***

Has the Church in America become that revolutionary movement that disturbs the false peace of the powers that be? Has the Church in America had the same reputation as the early Christians—as people who are turning the world upside down? Or, as Dr. King so powerfully prophesied, has the Church in America continued to be the arch defender of the status quo and therefore become for millions of people an irrelevant social club?

Just as crisis is coming for God's people in our text this morning, crisis will eventually come for you and me. You may not be going through a crisis right now. But someday you will. And when that day comes, ***will you have heeded the voice of God? Will you have heeded the word of God through the prophets? Will your trust be rooted in God's Spirit, or will your trust be rooted in talismans and slogans?***

The Good News, sisters and brothers is **we do not have to go the same route as the ancient Judahites**. The apostle Paul writes, [Slide 27]

*“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” — 1 Cor. 10.11*

We are people of the New Covenant. God has **come among us** in the Person of Jesus Christ. John's Gospel says God "**tabernacled**" among us in Christ. That means, Jesus, the Messiah, is the house where heaven and earth **overlap**, the person in whom God has made Godself known **definitively** and **finally**.

God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have sent the Holy Spirit to dwell among us, among both Jews and Gentiles, united as **one new humanity**. [Slide 28]

*"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" — 1 Cor. 3.16*

[Slide 29]

*"You (Gentile followers of Christ) are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. In [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by God's Spirit." — Eph. 2.19-22*

And the apostle Peter: [Slide 30]

*"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." — 1 Peter 2.4-5*

The Good News, sisters and brothers, is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God who spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, is the God who is revealed definitively and finally in Messiah Jesus of Nazareth. That God has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell among us and to lead us in God's ways so that we may be fully human and to fulfill our calling as human beings to reflect God's image into the world and the creation's praise to its Creator.

To do this, we must **repent** of the talismans and slogans in which we have placed our trust.

To do this, we must **interrogate the practices in which we participate** to see how they are forming us—In what or who are they building our trust?

To do this, we must **expose our hearts to the investigation and surgery of the Spirit**, to remove from our hearts any self-indulgence.

Just as we learned from the "Life Change from the Heart" series we just concluded a few weeks ago, we're called to engage in the **difficult but liberating work** of laying open our hearts to God, **digging beneath the surface** to find the **self-indulgence our resentment is pointing to**—to engaging in a **process with God of "cleaning out the inside of our cups"** (as Jesus put it).

In other words, we need **face the truth** that we've placed our trust in things other than God. And we need one another to help us **see our blind spots**. You and I, indwelled by the Holy Spirit, are the Temple of God. We need to **show up for one another**, to **walk with one another**, to **spur one another on to good works**.

**[Slide 31]**

This is one of the reasons I'm so grateful for my Grow+Serve group. This is why I'm so grateful for the friendships that have been forged here at New City. It's here in the body of Christ where God's Spirit moves me to do this hard work—to lay open my soul to God, and where the Spirit has done this liberating surgery in my life.

***Sisters and brothers, we are the new temple where God's Spirit dwells. May we forsake our talismans and slogans and with courageous vulnerability may we embrace the uncertainty of God's invisible, wild Spirit who is among us, leading us on the risky adventure of faith.***

**[Slide 32]** Let's pray.

***God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
God who has spoken through the prophets and apostles,  
God revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Have mercy on us and forgive us for placing our trust in talismans and slogans to mask our shame and justify our mistreatment of others.  
Empower your people to be the true Temple of God, the place where your Spirit dwells and ushers all who will call on you into your presence—your cleansing, liberating, and peacemaking presence.  
Give us ears to hear your voice and hearts willing to obey your word.  
In the name of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen***

**[Slide 33]** Benediction:

***May the God who spoke through the prophet Jeremiah,  
The God who exposes our hearts to the cleansing fire of his love,  
Make you the Temple of the Holy Spirit,  
May God cleanse your hearts of all idols: all talismans and slogans in which you've trusted.  
May God empower you to trust in his Spirit, the wild, untamed Spirit who blows wherever he pleases.  
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.***

***Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.***