

Ties That Bind Part 6

Title: Misleading Voices

Subtitle: God Judges Israel for Listening to the Wrong Influences

Passage: Jeremiah 10:19-21, 14:13-16, 23:1-6

Fill in the blank: **RIGHT** voices are better than **SOOTHING** voices.

Do you want to know the truth?

Think about that for a second. Do you want to know the truth? If you're anything like me, your first answer is probably yes, but there is a vast and growing body of research that suggests that perhaps Jack Nicholson was onto something when, while playing the part of Colonel Nathan Jessup in *A Few Good Men*, he famously growled, "You can't handle the truth!" And, in case you wanted to feel old, that movie was made nearly 35 years ago. You're welcome.

But the truth is, no pun intended, we often think we want the truth when we actually don't. Perhaps you've seen cartoons like this one, where you've got the gentleman offering unpleasant truths with all sorts of time on his hands, while the man serving up comforting lies has a line stretching around the block. Jesus may have said that the truth will set us free, but it's far too easy to find ourselves believing false words that go down smooth but will ultimately keep us stuck. And the issue, of course, isn't that we are purposefully believing what we know is false; it's that we want comfort and validation so badly that we are willing to believe what will give it to us.

In fact, studies have shown that when we are faced with unpleasant or uncomfortable truths, our brain responds in a similar way to how it responds to a physical attack. We quite literally shut down the parts of our brain responsible for logic and reasoning and fire up our emotion centers. That means when we are faced with truths we would rather deny, we stop thinking and get emotional. What could possibly go wrong?

If that weren't enough, you and I come hardwired with confirmation bias, where we tend to believe that which reaffirms our own beliefs, whether the facts support it or not. We think we want to know the truth, but research and experience demonstrate that as a species, we struggle with the truth more than we'd like to admit.

It's much easier to be a comfort-seeker than a truth-seeker.. And there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to be comfortable; in fact, it would be quite odd to desire discomfort. But what we must understand is that our desire for comfort makes us vulnerable to believing and living by lies.

Because we want to believe what makes us happy.

We want to believe that we are the good ones, and the bad ones are people not like us.

Consider the reactions we see when there is an act of violence or terror in our country. Everyone wants to know who was responsible, and they want to make sure it's someone not like them. And if it's someone like us, we say they were a lone wolf, but if it's someone with a different skin color or a different political ideology or a different religion, we claim it's evidence that all of those people are wicked. It's weird that we never say that when the bad ones look like us. We want the affirmation that

we're the good ones. Every time there is a tragedy like that, it reaffirms that many in our society are more concerned with protecting their tribe than pursuing truth and justice. Lord, have mercy.

We want to believe everything will be okay.

We want to believe we are on the right side of history.

We want to pin the world's problems on people out there, and so we seek out voices that will deliver these messages to us.

We want to understand what's happening around us in an increasingly complex and confusing world.

In short, we want to believe what makes us look and feel good.

And even as I make this point, there is a tendency for some of us to say to ourselves, "Yes, that's true that other people do that, but I sure don't." Look at our brains coming to the rescue when we face an uncomfortable truth.

In an excellent op-ed for Christianity Today this week, Justin Gibboney writes, "Our corrupt political and racial discourse teaches us to judge by identity and ideology instead of testing the spirits and assessing the fruit."

He goes on, "**When a tragedy or cultural rift appears, each faction in American life rapidly latches on to a consensus opinion. Like smoke from the flaming trash heap of our toxic political and racial discourse, these reactions smother our search for truth well before all the facts are available. Unaware or unconcerned about the angles our algorithms and cultural biases are hiding from us, we see the complicated as easy and the unknown as obvious, all conveniently aligned with our preconceived notions about who's good or evil.**"

In short, we let our opinions and biases shortcut our search for the truth, and then seek out voices that will confirm those opinions.

And I just want to ask, how is that working for us? I imagine you'll agree it's not great. And I just wonder if God might invite us into something better.

The problem, of course, with seeking out voices that make us feel good about ourselves or feel negatively towards others, is that they don't exactly have our best interests at heart. And many of us are stuck in our walk with God, stuck in our ability to truly understand and live out the radical truth of the gospel, and not experiencing the breakthrough God wants for us because we are following the wrong voices that encourage wrong motives and all kinds of unhealthy behaviors. In short, we are listening to lies.

In the New Testament book of Galatians, Paul famously wrote that when we are connected to the Spirit of God and when we are influenced by the Spirit of God, it produces fruit in us that leads to things like love, joy, peace, gentleness, self-control, and more.

Is it possible we are lacking these things because we are so heavily influenced by other voices and perspectives that there is no room left for the Holy Spirit to shape us?

Jesus, speaking in John 16, referred to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist writes, your word is truth, and Jesus uses that same phrase when praying to the Father in John 17, praying, **“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”**

And let us not forget that when it comes to lies, they don't simply come from humans with agendas. In John 8 Jesus says that when Satan lies, **“He speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”**

Or consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:4, **“The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the world in the gospel in the glory of Christ.”** And then later in the book in chapter 11 he says, **“Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”**

So there is a spiritual element to the lies and deception we see around us. Like any good deceiver, Satan tries to deceive us with that which looks good on the surface. And all of this causes me to think about the words of James, found in James 1:16-18, **“Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.”**

So today as we turn our attention to the book of Jeremiah, what we're going to see is the struggle to separate fact from fiction and prioritize believing the truth over believing what validates us is not just a modern problem. Israel, at the time of Jeremiah, was full of people claiming to speak for God who were actually doing great harm to the people.

And as we move through a few different passages today, I want to lay before us God's invitation to be formed by the truth in a world full of falseness.

I want to show you from Scripture what you ought to look for in your leaders and what you ought to be able to expect from leaders like me and the rest of our team.

I want us to consider and validate the very real harm many of us have suffered from leaders and personalities who claimed to have our best interests at heart but actually just use us for their own ends.

I want us to have the courage to look not at others, but at our own hearts, to consider how we are being formed and what lies we might be believing, and consider how those lies are holding us back.

And in the end, I want to point us to Jesus, who does not simply tell the truth, but is the truth. And he offers us a vision for our lives that is better than anything the lies of the world can offer us.

Through it all, I want us to see the fill-in-the-blank, which is this: **RIGHT voices are better than SOOTHING ones.**

This is the sixth and final part of our Ties that Bind series through the book of Jeremiah. If you're new to Bridgeway, our normal approach is to teach books of the Bible line-by-line, but in the case of

Jeremiah, it is a collection of writings rather than one cohesive narrative, and as such it is not only very long but it is also very repetitive, so we've taken a more thematic approach, exploring the key ideas and messages of this book.

I've titled this message "Misleading Voices," and we're going to look at the problems Israel faced that stemmed from listening to the wrong voices and receiving the wrong messages.

So please open in your Bibles to Jeremiah 10. If you need a Bible, there should be one underneath one of the seats in front of you, and if you're using one of those, you'll find Jeremiah 10 on page 638.

In these verses, we're going to see one category of misleading voice that had gained influence in Israel. Chapter 10 is this massive indictment of the idolatry of the people. The Lord is taking them to task for making gods for themselves out of created things like wood and silver. Look at what he says in verse 5:

"Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field." That's a bar right there. I want to hear a rapper put that in his next diss track. Use that one on someone this week. Man, you're like a scarecrow in a cucumber field. He goes on, **"and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."**

And then look what God says in verse 11: **"Thus you shall say to them: 'The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.'"** Skip down to verse 14

"Every man is stupid and without knowledge, (theme verse of our women's ministry) every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them."

Verse 17, **"Gather up your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under siege. For thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time, and I will bring distress on them, that they may feel it.'"**

And listen to what Jeremiah says starting in verse 19, speaking on behalf of Jerusalem: **"Woe is me because of my hurt! My wound is grievous. But I said, 'Truly this is an affliction, and I must bear it.' My tent is destroyed, and all my cords are broken; my children have gone from me, and they are not; there is no one to spread my tent again and to set up my curtains."**

This is a picture of Israel under God's judgment. The tent in the ancient Near East was a symbol of home and protection, and here it is a metaphor for the city of Jerusalem. The tent has collapsed, and the cords have snapped, implying total destruction. The children who have gone from me refer to inhabitants of Judah who had been taken into captivity. This is a picture of a society in utter ruin because of their idolatrous ways.

And look at verse 21, where Jeremiah places the blame: **"For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the Lord; therefore they have not prospered, and their flock is scattered."**

The idea here is that they have become like unthinking animals. When spiritual leaders stop seeking God, they lose their common sense. That's when pride sneaks in. That's when the lust for power sneaks in. That's when worldly agendas sneak in.

Turn over now to Jeremiah 23. Here, God will take these types of shepherds to task once again. **“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” Declares the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: ‘You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.’** And it goes on to say that God will get involved personally and raise up a righteous leader.

Part of the reason why Israel fell into judgment is that they were under the leadership of bad shepherds. The religious and civic leaders of Israel did not seek the Lord, but instead led out of their own pride. And the result was people who turned their backs on God and worshiped idols.

I love being a pastor. I love being one of your pastors. And I have a high level of respect for fellow pastors. I've seen firsthand how much many pastors sacrifice for the good of those God has entrusted to their care. I see the criticism they take, and I see how it impacts their families. I see the statistics about the mental and emotional health of pastors, and it's not great. And even here, where the staff culture is so healthy, it's hard work. So I'm very pro-pastor. But I've also seen too many stories of pastors missing the mark.

It seems like it's hard to go a week without hearing about a pastor or Christian leader having some sort of moral failure. I'm doing some research for an event we're hosting later this spring, and as part of that research, I read a book called *The Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church*, and it was just as light and fun as it sounds. But I read story after story of pastors who abused their spiritual authority and caused real harm. It made me sick. I know many of you have suffered under leadership like that, and I'm so sorry.

When pastors lose their way, the consequences are devastating. When pastors quit inquiring of the Lord and instead care about their own egos, God is dishonored, and people are hurt.

When the church leadership becomes focused on power games rather than humble service, the spiritual harm it does to people is extraordinary.

When the church concerns itself with building a brand instead of building the Kingdom, we've lost it.

When pastors become corrupted by worldly political agendas, the Church of Jesus Christ is cheapened and becomes a pawn in some worldly cultural war instead of a place where all people can experience the grace and mercy of God. And I'll tell you what, Bridgeway is a church run by people, and I'm one of them, so that means we are far from perfect.

But I can promise you this: This never has been and never will be a church corrupted by worldly politics, and you will never hear one word from anyone in this pulpit that is motivated by loyalty to a political side. We preach the Word of God at this church, without fear or favor. We fear God, not the world. If it were any different, I wouldn't attend here, let alone work here.

When pastors believe they are above accountability and thus avoid community and vulnerability, chaos ensues.

My point is that it's easy for pastors to get it wrong, with very real consequences.

In the New Testament book of 1 Peter, Peter tells pastors, **“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”**

That is what you, as a congregant, ought to expect from your pastors. And I'm so happy to tell you that my pastoral colleagues are men and women who live this out. And honestly, you shouldn't just take my word for it. Experience it for yourself because I'm confident that if you hang around here, you will.

But it raises the question, what do we expect from our spiritual leaders? Too often in society, leaders get promoted based on charisma and connections instead of the strength of their character. And in that book I mentioned, I read story after story of that happening in churches that wanted a charismatic and exciting leader so badly that they were willing to look the other way when obvious and disqualifying character defects came to light.

These types of leaders might try to soothe us with their words, but their actions scatter the flock. There is a reason why, when you look at all the different passages in the New Testament that talk about the qualifications for pastoral ministry or eldership, you read almost nothing about gifting. But you read a whole bunch about character. It's not because gifting doesn't matter. It's because when we elevate talented people who are lacking in character, people get hurt.

And so I urge you to expect that your spiritual leaders, including me, would have hearts that are soft toward the Lord and would be sensitive to listen to his voice. And for those who would aspire to lead, **heed the words of Proverbs 4:23 to guard your heart with all diligence, because everything you do flows from it.**

Before I move on to the other category of false, soothing voice that plagued Israel, I want to say a word to those of you who are here today and you have suffered under arrogant, or abusive, or politically corrupted, or otherwise unhealthy leadership.

I know there are many of you because you've told me your stories. I've heard about how you couldn't set foot in a church for months or even years. I've heard you tell me about the anxiety attacks and the tears. I've heard you say how you longed to come together for worship, but just felt like you couldn't because your wounds were so deep that the church felt unsafe.

First, your presence here took a lot of courage, and that is something to honor and celebrate.

Second, please be gentle with yourself. If you're anxious, that is ok. If you can't stay through the whole service, that's ok. God is not disappointed with you.

Third, please talk to someone you trust who can help you process your experience and your feelings. If that person is a professional therapist, even better.

Fourth, I want you to know that you are safe here. But I also want you to know that it is ok to be suspicious. Don't take my word for it. Let it be something you experience over time. I literally just gave someone who had some serious church hurt that advice a few months ago.

Fifth, God sees you. And God sees those who heart you. And he is overflowing with compassion, kindness, and mercy for you.

We are not a perfect church, and there is no doubt in my mind that people like me have been the cause of some people's church hurt. But the earnest desire of our hearts is that this is a place for those who have been hurt by the church to find healing, so they can connect with Jesus and community in truly life-giving ways.

So Israel had been harmed by bad shepherds, who harmed the people because they failed to seek God.

The next category of misleading voices belonged to false prophets, so we're going to start with them and then look at some other bad influences.

A recurring problem in Jeremiah is that, when God promised judgment for their unfaithfulness, false prophets tried to assure the people that everything would be fine.

Note Jeremiah 6:14, God says, **"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush."**

You see literally those exact words repeated in Jeremiah 8:11-12.

And why did these prophets get an audience? Because they were telling the people what they wanted to hear. When Jeremiah told them the truth about God's coming judgment, these false prophets tried to soothe the people by saying everything would be okay.

Flip over to Jeremiah 26, and look at what happens. Keep in mind Jeremiah is a collection of documents, so it's not necessarily in chronological order. Jeremiah is commanded by God to speak to all the cities of Judah and give them a word of warning so that they might turn from their wickedness and avoid judgment. Verse 4:

"You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord:' If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth."

And look how the religious leaders respond, verse 8, **"And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him saying, 'You shall die!'"**

Great, so that went well. Eventually, everyone comes to their senses enough that Jeremiah is spared. But don't we do the same thing when we get information we don't like? We might not try to kill someone, but we deflect, we ignore, we counterattack, or we insult their character.

What's worse, if we're not careful, we can fill our minds with voices that promise false comfort that they cannot deliver.

We might listen to prosperity gospel messages that wrongly promise health and wealth, leaving us ill-equipped to face the challenges of real life.

We might believe that we can manifest or speak into existence our hopes and dreams, and thus be totally unprepared for disappointment.

We can get led astray by someone who convinces us that our side, our party, people like us are always right, which will cause us to ignore God's call to search our own hearts to see where we might be out of alignment with him.

And when we fill our minds with these types of messages, we set ourselves up to freak out when someone asks us to face reality.

I think of the words of Paul again from Galatians, where he laments in Galatians 4:16, **"Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?"**

In Jeremiah 14, he complains to God about the false prophets he is with, and God responds starting in verse 13 (14):

"Then I said: 'Ah, Lord God, behold, the prophets say to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.' " 14 And the Lord said to me: "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. 15 Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name although I did not send them, and who say, 'Sword and famine shall not come upon this land': By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed. 16 And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword, with none to bury them—they, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their evil upon them."

God says to Jeremiah I didn't send the false prophets. I don't endorse their message. They will be eventually be destroyed along with those who believed them.

Again, in Jeremiah 23: **"Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. 17 They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' "**

So I want to ask you, who are you listening to? Who or what is influencing your thinking and your worldview?

Are they soothing voices that are telling you everything is going to be ok and you don't need to change anything? I think we have some of those in our world today.

Are they conspiratorial voices that are trying to give easy answers to complex problems?

Are they overly judgmental voices that lack grace and compassion?

Are they voices that agree with us and never actually challenge our own thinking?

To be honest with you, culturally, I think the biggest problem isn't that we listen to soothing voices as much as it is that we listen to voices that are selling us rage and fear. Sometimes these voices claim to be Christian, Lord, have mercy. Often, they are overtly political, selling a vision of good and evil in which we must fight the other side with everything we have. I don't care what side they are on; they are toxic, they are deeply anti-Christian, and they are harming you intellectually, emotionally, mentally, relationally, and spiritually. And if you don't believe that, I promise you have people close to you who do.

You cannot be filled with the joy of the Lord if you are filling yourself up with the rage of the world.

You cannot exude the Fruit of the Spirit when you are drowning in the false promises of our culture.

You cannot have a vision for the Kingdom of God and your participation in it if you are letting false prophets and false teachers and false podcasters pollute your heart with a vision of fear and division.

Too many of us, for far too long, have filled our minds with the rantings of our favorite media personalities or numbed ourselves on a diet of TikTok and Instagram reels or doomscrolled our way into oblivion while giving sparse attention to spiritual formation through the word of God, it is going to shape us in particular ways, and we may not be happy with the results we get.

Listen, there is no judgment here. There is one who has your best interests at heart, who is deeply committed to your joy and flourishing, who made you on purpose and for a purpose, and who offers you forgiveness and freedom, and it's not the algorithm.

Perhaps today is the day when we take an honest look at who has our attention. Perhaps the day is we consider how those voices are influencing everything from our worldview to our mood. And maybe today is the day that we turn off the rage baiting, we turn off the voices that offer false comfort, we turn off the voices that preach a false gospel of salvation through accumulation, and we tune in to God so we can be shaped by the voice of truth.

I remember several years ago, there was a gentleman who attended our church who has since moved away. He was about old enough to be my dad, and we struck up something of a friendship through frequent conversations in the lobby when he came to church and occasional emails. And I remember one day at church, he found me, and he said, "I'm done." And I said, "Uhhh, done with what? That could mean a lot of things." And he said he was done filling his mind with culture war rage. He said he realized how angry it was making him, how dishonest it all was, and how much it was interfering with his ability to truly walk with God.

To be honest, I didn't even know he was into that stuff. But I told him that's great to hear, you'll be so much better off for it. The change in his countenance and attitude was almost immediate. He exuded the Fruit of the Spirit, not the fear and anger of our culture. I wonder if today needs to be the day that some of you say you're done.

And maybe your hang-up isn't that stuff.

Maybe today is the day you say in Jesus name, you're done listening to the voices that leave you in a constant state of comparison.

Maybe today is the day you're done listening to the algorithm and focus more on building real community.

Maybe today is the day you're done believing the voices that tell you peace will come with the next raise or the next purchase.

Maybe today is the day you say you're done listening to the voices that say you need to live for the attention of others.

I don't know what it is for you, but I know there is one who speaks a different word and invites us into a different story.

In Jeremiah 23, as God is letting the bad shepherds and false prophets have it, look what God says in Jeremiah 23:5 if you have it open. **“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”**”

There is a promise of a coming king, a good king, who will tell a different story than the bad shepherds and false prophets.

Fast forward to Luke 1. The angel appears to Mary to tell her she will give birth to Jesus, and look what he says: **“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”**

Israel had some good kings after Jeremiah, but the promised true good king, came to us hundreds of years after Jeremiah.

He was born into a world where leaders lusted for power and domination and where traits like gentleness and humility weren't just underappreciated, they were seen as weakness. He was born into a world as divided as ours now and didn't take sides but introduced a whole new way of life. He came into a world where the Romans slaughtered their enemies and called it peace and he transformed the world through suffering love.

And his message to us is not clean your life up, or try this program, or go on this cleanse, or get this new gadget, or oh my gosh have you heard of this new podcast, or do this and you'll optimize your life.

His message is if you're tired and weary and worn out and all the stuff that was supposed to make you happy just isn't working for you, come to me and rest.

His message, Luke 4, is **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”**

The right voice we need is the voice of Jesus, who calls us away from the madness of our world to rest in him. He is the good shepherd. He is the one who doesn't seek to divide and cast out but welcomes all of us just as we are to receive his forgiveness and mercy. He is the one who cannot lie, but is full of grace and truth. He is the one we were created for. He tells us the truth, that we are deeply known, deeply loved, and there is salvation for us if we put our trust in him.

May we give him our attention, may we give him our affection, and in him may we find rest for our souls.

