

How Does Jeremiah 17:9 Relate to the Constitutional Separation of Powers?

In their public presentations, our **WallBuilders** speakers frequently provide historical examples of how specific Bible verses impacted particular aspects of American culture. For example, the story of Matthew Maury and his geographical discoveries involves Psalm 8 and Ecclesiastes 1:6; Samuel Kent (“A Father of American Jurisprudence”) cites 1 Samuel 7:15-16 with the formation of circuit courts; Isaiah 33:22 is associated with the three branches of government; and other such examples.¹ Many audience members, intrigued by how specific Bible verses directly shaped American practices, look up the Bible references that we routinely mention and are immediately impressed with their specificity and obvious applicability. But almost universally when they check John Adams’ mention of Jeremiah 17:9² as the basis of the constitutional separation of powers, they are perplexed and often conclude that our speaker must have used the wrong reference. It doesn’t seem that Jeremiah 17:9 relates to constitutional separation of powers, but it actually does. Allow us to explain, but first let’s lay some groundwork.

When Progressives grasped the reins of common education in the early 1900s, they introduced profound systemic changes, including age-graded education (previously, students were grouped according to knowledge level rather than age level), compulsory education (school attendance had been generally voluntary), extended school years (school was often three months a year, but Progressives made it most of the year), and twelve years of government education (prior to the Progressives, virtually no one went past eight-grade learning levels, after which they would enter college or some trade or profession).³ These changes were not because previous educational practices had been unsuccessful, for it had been just the opposite. In fact, few college graduates today can master the eighth-grade exit exam given in the early 1900s by most states,⁴ when school only lasted for a few months a year and for only eight years.

Perhaps the most significant transformation imposed by Progressives was that students were no longer taught how to think, but rather how to learn. Instead of being trained to reason sequentially and study and confirm independent sources, students were now required to listen to what the teacher said and then repeat it back. Thus, true/false, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank tests were introduced,⁵ for they did not require a mastery of subject-matter knowledge but rather only a mastery of whatever the teacher had said. By this change, the teacher became the small end of the funnel of knowledge – everything flowed through the teacher to the student. To invoke an old proverb, no longer did the student learn how to fish, but rather the teacher now gave them the fish. Because students were no longer trained in critical thinking, widespread indoctrination became the result – whatever the teacher believed was what was communicated to students, which they also came to believe. The warning by Jesus in Luke 6:40 had become reality: “Every student, when he is fully trained, will be like his teacher.” Progressivism, liberalism, secularism, relativism, socialism, and other isms were now freely communicated to students by academia, and these beliefs have now thoroughly permeated the culture as those students’ become adults and filled various professions.

One teaching common among Progressives (and now widely believed even by many Christians) is that man is innately good but sometimes does bad things.⁶ But the Bible teaches just the opposite – that man is innately bad but sometimes does good things; and that is only when man’s wicked heart is remade by God.

Under the Progressive belief, if man shoots someone, the problem is with the gun; since man is instinctively good, it can’t be his fault that something bad happened, so we need to regulate the gun, not the man. Or if someone gets drunk and abuses his spouse, it is because man has a medical disease beyond his control – it’s not his fault, for he is inherently good. Or if someone fathers a dozen children out of wedlock, it is because he was not given enough condoms in school. In short,

under Progressivism, if man does something bad, there was some outside cause for it, for man is inherently good.

But the Bible says just the opposite. Notice a few verses on this:

- Mark 7:21-23 – For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within. (Matthew 5:19)
- Genesis 6:5 & 8:21 – The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
- Romans 3:9 – It is written: “None is righteous, no, not one.” (c.f. Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3)
- Ecclesiastes 9:3 – The hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts.
- Galatians 5:19-21 – Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like.
- Psalm 5:9 – For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.

According to the Bible, man will only begin to do what is good when God changes his heart (see, for example Romans 6:6,16-17,19-20, 2 Corinthians 5:17, etc.). Without a life changed by God, mankind is naturally inclined to do what is wrong.

The Founders firmly held this Biblical view. They therefore constructed government fully expecting the worst – expecting that the people leading all three branches would become corrupt. Fifty-five hundred years of recorded history prior to the Founding Fathers had

demonstrated that as the pattern of every human government that had ever existed. Understanding this, the Founders made specific plans to help limit the inherent corruption of man and they sought ways to prevent all three branches from becoming wicked at the same time. They wanted a fail-safe so that if one did, then perhaps the other branches could restrain it or drag it back to its limited function. The result was the various clauses providing and enforcing Separation of Powers.

The following excerpt is from the Founders’ Bible and it explains how the truth inherent in Jeremiah 17:9 helped produce the constitutional separation of powers.

Jeremiah 17:9 – The Constitutional Separation of Powers

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

The separation of powers and reciprocal checks and balances incorporated throughout the Constitution has been heralded as one of the most important features of American government, enabling it not only to survive but to thrive for over two centuries. History was filled with examples showing that when government power was centralized in one body or leader, that government always became a danger to the rights of individuals and brought that nation to ruin. But the Founding Fathers had not only the examples of history to guide them but especially the teachings of the Bible.

A well-known verse addressing this subject was Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?” This verse encapsulated what Calvinistic ministers and theologians termed the “depravity of man” or “total depravity”⁷ (that the natural heart of man easily embraced moral and civil degradation), and it was a frequent topic for sermons in the Founding Era. The Founding Fathers understood the import of this verse and openly cited it – as when John Adams reminded Americans:

“Let me conclude by advising all men to look into their own hearts, which they will find to be ‘deceitful above all things and desperately wicked’ [Jeremiah 17:9].”⁸

The Biblically illiterate believe in the innate goodness of man – that man will naturally do what is right, but experience regularly affirms the opposite: without a heart regenerated by the power of God, man will routinely do what is wrong. Adams specifically rejected any notion of the innate goodness of man, especially when it came to government:

“To expect self-denial from men when they have a majority in their favor, and consequently power to gratify themselves, is to disbelieve all history and universal experience – it is to disbelieve revelation and the Word of God, which informs us ‘the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked’ [Jeremiah 17:9]. . . . There is no man so blind as not to see that to talk of founding a government upon a supposition that nations and great bodies of men left to themselves will practice a course of self-denial is either to babble like a newborn infant or to deceive like an unprincipled impostor.”⁹

And even those who had experienced a regenerated heart through the power of God in Christ and who did not embrace Calvinism nevertheless knew enough about the truth of this verse and the tendencies of the heart to not even fully trust themselves to be above its corrupting influence. As John Quincy Adams explained:

“I believe myself sincere; but the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked [Jeremiah 17:9]. I do not believe the total depravity of man, but I am deeply conscious of the frailty of my own nature.”¹⁰

Understanding this principle from Jeremiah 17 – a principle that was accepted by all sides of the theological spectrum – the Founders knew that government would be much safer if all power did not repose in the same authority. Making practical application of this Biblical truth, they therefore divided and checked power between branches so that if one leader or branch went wicked, the other two might still check and stop it. As George Washington explained:

“A just estimate of that love of power and proneness to abuse it which predominates in the human heart is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position. The necessity of reciprocal checks in the exercise of political power by dividing and distributing it into different depositories . . . has been evinced [demonstrated] by experiments ancient and modern, some of them in our country and under our own eyes.”¹¹

This remarkable feature of American government – the separation of powers and reciprocal checks and balances – can be attributed to the Founders’ understanding of Jeremiah 17:9.

Endnotes

1. For more information, see *The Founders' Bible* (Shiloh Road Publishers, 2012).
2. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), Vol. III, p. 443, "On Private Revenge III," published in the *Boston Gazette*, September 5, 1763; John Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (London: John Stockdale, 1794), Vol. III, p. 289, "Letter VI. The Right Constitution of a Commonwealth, examined."
3. For more information, see "A Short History of United States' Education 1900 to 2006," historyliteracy.org (accessed on September 7, 2016); "10 Things You Should Know About the American Founding," *The Catholic World Report*, July 3, 2012; "A campus shared by the College, the Academy and the Charity School," Penn University Archives & Records Center (accessed on September 7, 2016); "John Dewey," *Biography* (accessed on September 7, 2016).
4. See some examples of 8th grade exit exams in: B. A. Hathaway, *1001 Test Examples in Arithmetic with Answers* (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers Company, 1890); *Warp's Review Books* (Minden, NE: Warp Publishing Company, 1928), on various subjects; *Colorado State Eighth Grade Examination Question Book* (Lincoln, NE: Lincoln Supply Co., 1927).
5. See, for example, *Colorado State Eighth Grade Examination Question Book* (Nebraska: 1927), pp. 4, 10, 12, questions from a 1927 Agriculture, Arithmetic, and Civics test; "true-false test," Merriam-Webster (accessed on September 7, 2016); "multiple-choice," Merriam-Webster (accessed on September 7, 2016).
6. See an example of this philosophy in Theodore Roosevelt, "Who is a Progressive?" *Teaching American History*, April 1912.
7. See, for example, "total depravity," Merriam-Webster (accessed on September 6, 2016); Herman Hanko, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (1976), "Chapter 1: Total Depravity."
8. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), Vol. III, p. 443, "On Private Revenge III," published in the *Boston Gazette*, September 5, 1763.
9. John Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (London: John Stockdale, 1794), Vol. III, p. 289, "Letter VI. The Right Constitution of a Commonwealth, examined."
10. John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1876), Vol. XI, p. 270, November 16, 1842.
11. George Washington, *Address of George Washington, President of the United States, and Late Commander in Chief of the American Army, to the People of the United States, Preparatory to His Declination* (Baltimore: Christopher Jackson, 1796), p. 22.