

Thomas Watson said, "The devil baits his hook with religion." The enemy will use religion to distract people from the Lord Jesus Christ and his claims. That's precisely what happened with the Jewish leadership in the 1st C. We are still in Matthew 23 (777) this morning. We looked at the first 4 of 7 woes from Jesus. Curses. The sermon of woes. Jesus pulls no punches in this chapter. Ryle says, "It shows how utterly abominable the spirit of the scribes and Pharisees is in God's sight, in whatever form it may be found."¹ We are in the deep end of Matthew this morning. Our next few passages are tough, on a number of levels. We are going to do some Bible study this morning. Here we have the Jewish King's final break with Judaism. It is all coming to a head. From the beginning we have seen that the story of Jesus is the culmination of the story of Israel. / Last week we considered the first 4 of 7 woes so let's consider the three final woes: woe to the hypocrites, the prophet-killers, the unrepentant.

1. Woe to the Hypocrites 25-26 – The Jewish leadership had become hypocrites. The word came from the theatre. Those who wore masks to perform for people. They are fakes, phonies. They were consumed with ritual purity and avoiding uncleanness according the Law. They clean the outside of the cup, but not the inside, where it really matters. It looks good externally, but internally it is still dirty. Inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. They are only in this religious game for their own power and wealth. Self-centeredness. The word means lack of self-control or weakness of will.

27-28 - Every year at Passover, the tombs would be cleaned up. The customary Jewish practice was to whitewash all the tombs in order to make them clearly visible as the Jews made their way to Jerusalem, lest they accidentally touch a grave and make themselves unclean according to the Law. That would ruin their Passover plans. So as you entered the city, you would see all these beautiful stones. That is the Jewish leadership. They look good on the outside. They keep up appearances. But in reality, they are decaying corpses.

They are actually unclean. Their purity was partial. Seemingly pure externally, but impure on the inside. Jesus contrasts the inside and the outside. It is not good enough to be good on the outside only.

15:7-20 / They needed new hearts! New hearts must come first. First clean the inside, that the outside may also be clean. Only the Spirit can do that, which was a gift of the new covenant. Jesus brings a new and better covenant. That is what Matthew is about: the end of the OC and the beginning of the NC, or in other words, the Kingdom. **26:28**. / And what are the two fundamental gifts of the NC? Forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit who transforms us on the inside. This story is heading towards the cross, then to Pentecost. Forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus says, you pretend to be holy, but are blind fakes. You are greedy, you lack self-control, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Ouch. They claim to be zealous about the law and Jesus says you are lawless. / It is easy to point fingers at the Pharisees, but I wonder, do you fit in Jesus' indictment? What Paul says is having the appearance of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim 3:5). There is a lot of that in Abilene, TX. We come to church - *most* Sundays, we dress nice, we give - some, we serve - some. But your heart is far from God. He has no bearing in the vast majority of your thinking and living. In your

¹ JCR, 242.

private life, are you filled with bitterness? Do you refuse to forgive? You hold grudges? You gossip and slander? Do you cause division in the church? Are you harboring a secret addiction to pornography?

Dear friend, do you have a heart for the Lord? Notice that is a different question from are you religious or do you do religious things. The Scribes and Pharisees did a lot. And Jesus is not against doing. But he is against doing things outwardly when your heart is not in line with your actions. The solution is to repent: full surrender to the good and sovereign King.

2. Woe to the Prophet-Killers 29-32 – They are no better than their fathers, who murdered the prophets. **Jer 7:24-29.** God's patience has run out with this generation. They build the tombs of the righteous. They are now sadly at odds with God and God's purposes. Listen to Stephen in his final sermon in Acts 7:51-52: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered." Like fathers like sons.

Jerusalem had become the graveyard of the prophets (Rev 11:7-10). Jerusalem had sadly become a bloodthirsty city. This is not a case of mission drift, but mission reversal. And their mission had been reversed long before now: 2 Chron 36:15-17: "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. Therefore, he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand." In the past, God had judged his people through a pagan nation and he is about to do so again, this time through the Roman army.

Notice the language Jesus uses here in v. 32: fill up the measure of your fathers. This same language is used several places in Scripture. Gen 15:13-16: "Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." There was a certain amount of iniquity God was willing to tolerate. They would fill up their measure, then God would judge. God would dispossess the Amorites for their sin but not till they had filled up the full measure. God is patient but eventually his patience runs out. As the saying goes, "the millstones of God's justice grind slowly, but they grind very fine."

The OT often spoke of the cup of God's wrath. Over and over, right from the start, Israel would rebel and slowly fill the cup of God's wrath (Rev 14:8-10, 16:19, 18:20, 24). Dan 8:23 speaks of transgressors reaching their limit. Dan 9:24 is a prophecy about the coming of Christ and God decrees 70 weeks to "finish the transgression." The Jewish document 2 Maccabees says something similar: "With other nations the Lord patiently delays punishment until they fill up the full measure of their sins" (6:14).

There is a measure of rebellion which remains to be completed and Jesus is saying it is happening now, on this terminal generation.

Jesus says cap off your father's long history of murdering those sent by God, which they will do when they crucify their Messiah. He had already said this in parable form a couple of times: **21:19, 34-43**. The apostle Paul spoke of this reality as well: **1 Thess 2:14-16** at last, literally *eis telos*, the ESV softens but look at the footnote: completely, forever, NAS: fully, KJV: to the uttermost.

Friends, if you are not a Christian, you need to hear this. God is patient. He is longsuffering, but there is a time when his patience will run out. Has he sent messenger after messenger to you? He has sent one today. Will you hear his voice this time? Will you stop running and submit to him. He has given many opportunities but at some point he stops, and then all that is left is judgment.

33-36 - Jesus calls them snakes, serpents, a brood of vipers on their way to hell. They are the offspring of the serpent. Remember Gen 3:15 and the antithesis? There will be ongoing, perpetual hostility between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Tragically, Israel has taken the wrong side. They are opposing the offspring of the woman who comes to crush the head of the serpent. They're the serpents. In John 8:44, Jesus said them, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murder from the beginning." In Matthew, that's what John the Baptist said right from the earliest chapters. **3:7-10**. The message has been the same from the start: the Jewish leadership is corrupt, don't trust in your Jewish heritage, that will mean nothing in the new covenant, judgment is coming and the only way to escape is to believe the gospel and repent. / Jesus sent prophets and wise men and scribes. **10:16-23, 20:18-19**.

Then, even more shockingly, Jesus says *all* the righteous blood shed on earth will be on them. From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah whom they murdered. What is Jesus getting at here? The way we would say it is "from Gen to Rev." But he is using the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew order is different than ours. Our English OT is not structured chronologically, but logically. But the Hebrew Bible starts with Genesis and ends with 2 Chron. What Jesus means is that from the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures right through to the end you are murderers of the righteous. We find Abel's death in Genesis. Zechariah's murder is recorded in 2 Chron 24:21, the last book of the Bible in the Hebrew order.² In Gen 4, when Abel is killed, the Lord says that his blood is crying out to him from the ground (Gen 4:10). With the death of Zechariah, Joash the King said "May the Lord see and avenge" (2 Chron 24:22). Their martyrdom will require retribution. Their blood will be accounted for and Jesus says this generation will do the accounting.

But why are they responsible for all of that shed blood? They are more culpable because God came in the flesh. They listened to the authoritative teaching from the Son of David himself, witnessed miracle after miracle yet still demanded signs. And ultimately, they took the side of the Romans and killed their

² Zech 11:12-13 or Berech. is another name for Jehoiada (Jordan 70). Jeh's grandson. Intentional conflation. 8 options. See Wenham. Father could have had two names, common. Matt/Levi, Jude/Thaddeus etc.

Messiah. The righteous will be upon them, and tragically – this is what they themselves ask for:
27:24-26.

In Matt 23:36, Jesus says all this will come upon this generation. When the word “generation” is used in Matthew, it *always* refers to his contemporaries. Every time (11:16, 12:41-42, 45). This generation will fill up the cup of God’s wrath. The “wrath to come” that John the Baptist warned them about in ch. 3 is about to be released as God sends the Roman army to destroy their temple.

3. Woe to the Unrepentant 37-39 – This is Jesus’ last public appeal, his final warning. Jesus rebukes with tears in his eyes. This rebuke is out of love. This is the proper posture towards the unrepentant. This double “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” shows his compassionate love for them. Just like in Acts “Saul, Saul.” Or Abraham, Abraham, or Martha, Martha.

I wonder, do you share this burden for the lost? Does your heart break for the brokenness of our world, for the lostness of your family and neighbors? An evangelistic church starts with people broken for the lost. God, make it happen among us.

God has been so patient. He sent them prophets and wise men and apostles – over and over. He warned them repeatedly. But they were not willing. In John 5:40, Jesus said to the Jews: “you refuse to come to me that you might have life.” It is the same thing that Stephen said to the Jewish people who stoned him: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”

Tragically, Jerusalem is lost. She has become the harlot, Babylon, the city that stones the prophets. They stoned Zechariah (2 Chron 24:21). They stoned Jeremiah.³ They stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58-59). So their house is left to them desolate. When Jesus says “your house” he is referring to the temple, which the next chapter will be all about: **24:1-2**. The temple is now desolate. Jesus entered the temple and cleaned it out, which was an enacted parable of judgment. It has become a den of robbers, rather than a house of prayer. It is no longer God’s house. It is *their* house, and it is desolate. He is done. He is abandoning it, just like he did in Ezekiel 10:18-19 and 11:22-23 and he never returned.

This was the warning of OT prophet after OT prophet. Covenant breakers would have their temple and city destroyed. Lev 26:31-33 lists the curses of the covenant: “And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.”

1 Kin 9:6-9: “But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have

³ Liv. Pro. 2:1.

consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they abandoned the LORD their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore the LORD has brought all this disaster on them.'" / **Jer 7:2-4, 11-15, 20, 25.**

Micah 3:9-12: "Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, 'Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.' Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height."

Just like the prophets promised. Mal 3:1-2: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." John the Baptist was the messenger. He came and warned, now the Lord is coming to judge the temple.

God has warned Israel repeatedly that if they don't repent he will destroy their temple and their city. That is the main message of all the prophets and now is the end of God's patience. Their cup is filling up. This will be the end of OC Israel. This has been the main theme for three chapters. He has said the same thing several different ways: **21:19, 21:43, 22:7.**

Then Jesus ends this chapter by quoting Ps 118. That is how this section started: **21:9-10.** This is about the Lord coming to his temple, sung every year at Passover. But he is coming in judgment on the temple. Jesus tells his audience *you* will not see me until *you* acknowledge me. He is not talking about the second coming but his coming in judgment on Israel. We'll see that more clearly in the coming weeks.

Jesus uses a vivid illustration here in v. **37**. The mother instinct to protect her young is remarkable. And this instinct exists even in the animal kingdom. When a mother hen sees a coming fire, will gather her hens under her and under her wings to keep them safe. Sometimes she is successful and there have been recorded instances of people, after the fire has gone, finding a burnt mother hen with live chicks under her wings. Jesus is here warning about a specific, local judgment on Jerusalem, but that judgment is a precursor to final judgment. God's wrath is coming for all sinners. Except for those who trust Christ, except for those whom Christ has offered himself as a propitiation – a sacrifice that absorbs the wrath of God. He gathers us under his protection and bears the penalty we deserved if we'll but trust him. If you reject the invitation of Jesus, it will lead to disaster and destruction, but he invites, indeed commands all to repent and trust in him and he promises "whoever comes to me I will never cast out."

