

JESUS LAMENTS OVER JERUSALEM

Matthew 23:1-39

Key Verse: 23:37

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”

In this passage Jesus laments over Jerusalem. Jesus reveals the heart of God for his chosen people. Jesus also exposes the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. This passage can be divided into three parts. In verses 1-12, Jesus tells his disciples how to be different from the Pharisees. In verses 13-36, Jesus pronounces seven woes on the Pharisees. We find repentant topics here. In verses 37-39, Jesus laments over Jerusalem. Let's share God's heart and repent of our sin through this study.

First, be humble servants, not self-exalted teachers (1-12).

Look at verses 1-3a. “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.’” Jesus encouraged people to accept the word of God even when the Pharisees were teaching it. The word of God works mightily through its own power. Some Bible students grow into spiritual giants, though their teachers run away. Jesus encourages respect for God's word. The Pharisees may have said, “Amen, Jesus! Tell those rebellious people to listen to us!”

Then, however, Jesus pointed out the problems of the Pharisees. Firstly, they did not practice what they preached. The word of God must be put into practice.

Knowing it and teaching it does not relieve one from the duty of obeying it. Secondly, they did not have compassion for the people they taught (4). They went into great detail about following rules and punishments. But they did not teach God's mercy to sinners. After hearing their messages, people felt completely condemned. Thirdly, their motivation was self-glory seeking. Jesus said, "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long..." (5). Phylacteries were boxes worn on the forehead or wrist that contained Scripture verses. They were reminders to love God and to love others (See Ex 13:1-10; 11-16; Dt 4:6-9; 11:13-21). The Pharisees did not think about the meaning of the verses. They only thought about the size of their boxes. They also loved special greetings and honorable titles. In brief, they loved honor from men, but did not honor God. Jesus' disciples must be different than this.

In verses 8-10, Jesus taught his disciples to keep God at the center of their fellowship. Jesus did not allow them to be called "rabbi," "father," or "teacher." They were all brothers; God was their Father. They were all disciples; Christ was their Teacher. We are all sinners before the holy God. But God loves us and saved us through Christ. God is our Father and the Christ is our Savior and Teacher.

Jesus also taught his disciples to be humble servants. Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (11). In the sinful nature, people want to exalt themselves and be honored by men. To become a servant requires self-denial and humility. A servant recognizes Jesus as God and others as precious brothers and sisters. A servant knows the mind of Christ and does what Jesus wants. A servant knows the need of others and meets it. Jesus served us by becoming a sin sacrifice for us. It was complete humiliation. When he did so, God exalted him as King of

kings. Look at verse 12. “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Following Dr. Samuel Lee’s departure, Mother Barry served as the general director of UBF for four years. From this year, she retired and has no official position. However, she is serving others just as she did before. She welcomes all kinds of people to her house and gives them the word of God and delicious food. She prays for them and shares good books and movies. Little children, high school students, and senior missionaries all feel respect and love from her. They acknowledge her as a shepherd and ask her prayer support. Dr. Ben Toh is a man of standing in American society. He is also a legendary figure in UBF. Yet he is very humble and kind in serving young disciples of Jesus. As a result, they love and respect him and joyfully cowork with him in carrying out conferences. Jesus wants us to be God-centered and to be humble servants of others, not self-exalted teachers.

Second, Jesus pronounces woes on the Jewish leaders (13-36).

In verses 13-36, Jesus pronounces seven woes, prefaced by, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” The word “woe” expresses grief as well as warning. Jesus’ heart was broken as he pronounced these woes. Jesus was not condemning the Pharisees; Jesus was very sorry about their poor spiritual condition. Jesus explained why in detail.

Look at verse 13b. “You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” Through Jesus’ coming into this world, the kingdom of heaven was opened to sinners. Whoever repents and accepts Jesus enters the kingdom of heaven. But the

Pharisees did not want to repent. They opposed Jesus to protect their establishment power, even calling him demon-possessed. They hindered sincere people from entering the kingdom. It was the first reason Jesus pronounced woe upon them.

Look at verse 15b. “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.” The Pharisees worked hard with a big vision. But they did not lead people to Jesus; they made others like themselves. In doing so, they made others twice as wretched as they were before.

In verses 16-22, Jesus calls the Pharisees “blind” three times. It was because they did not see the living God. They saw gold and gifts. But they did not see God. The Pharisees were also dishonest. They would say, “I swear by the temple that I will give to the needy.” But they did not keep their vow, saying, “Well, I did not swear by the gold of the temple, so it is not binding.” Vows are important to God. God expects us to keep them. This is October, and many of us celebrate wedding anniversaries. We keep our wedding vows to honor God, and because we love each other. We also vow to be honest on our income tax returns, as witnesses in court, and in taking exams. These vows are important, for they are made before the living God.

Look at verse 23b. “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” The Pharisees were so meticulous in tithing that they gave a tenth of their garden herbs. They seemed to be extremely zealous in their study and practice of the law.

But they did not learn God's character from the law. They did not know God who gave them the law. So they neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness.

God's justice, mercy and faithfulness are well revealed in the cross of Jesus. God is just. Therefore, God must punish sin. God punished Jesus to the full measure for our sins (Ro 3:26). God is merciful. While we were helpless in our sins, God could have crushed us. Instead, he forgave our sins through Jesus (Ro 5:6). God is faithful. God promised to send a Savior. As Matthew 1 records, God worked faithfully to keep this promise for 42 generations. During that time, his chosen people were unfaithful. Still, God was faithful. Finally God sent his Son Jesus as our Savior. Through Bible study we must learn God's justice, mercy and faithfulness, and practice them. Then we can grow in his image. This is more important than giving our spices to God.

In verses 25-26, Jesus compares the Pharisees to their cups and dishes. They paid a lot of attention to outer appearance: religious garments, good manners and the performance of ceremonies. But they paid far less attention to cleansing their hearts. Jesus wants to cleanse us from the inside. When our hearts are cleansed by Jesus' blood, our outer life will also be pleasing to God.

Verses 27-28 are similar. What we say and do should match who we are. We should not claim to be a fantastic servant of God when our inner life is like a dead man. We should be humble enough to "be real" with God, with ourselves and with others. Then we can come to Jesus as we are, and he gives life to our souls.

Look at verses 29-32. When the Pharisees studied the Bible or God's history, they did not identify with sinners. They groundlessly believed they were better than

their forefathers. Their forefathers persecuted the prophets. The prophets' message convicted them of sin and urged them to repent. They did not want to repent, so they got mad at the prophets and killed them. The Pharisees knew that their forefathers were wrong. But they were just the same. They did not like the message of repentance, so they persecuted Jesus. Finally they would kill him.

Hypocrisy had so blinded them that they were about to destroy the Messiah. Jesus wanted to save them. He spoke seriously with drastic words. Look at verses 33-34. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town." After his resurrection, Jesus sent his servants to testify to the Pharisees. The apostles were persecuted severely, and Stephen was martyred. But the gospel message was proclaimed clearly to the Jewish leaders and some of them accepted it, including St. Paul. Jesus wanted to save the Pharisees from hell, even though it was very costly.

The sin of hypocrisy breaks Jesus' heart. Jesus really wants us to come to him as we are, with all of our sins and weaknesses, and to accept his love. Jesus wants us to live by faith in his love and to love God and love one another. I repent that sometimes I try to speak well, instead of sharing the word of God with repentance. At this moment, let's ask Jesus to cleanse us in his blood from the sin of hypocrisy.

Third, Jesus laments over Jerusalem (37-39).

Look at verse 37. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a

hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” Jesus’ lament in this verse encompasses the entire history of Jerusalem, including the terrible sins and repeated failures of God’s chosen people, and God’s unfailing love for them.

God established his people in Jerusalem and wanted to make it a city on a hill, a blessing for the salvation of the whole world (Isa 2:3). God had a great vision that peoples of all nations would stream into Jerusalem to study the Bible and to learn his love and to live by his word. God foresaw the whole world coming back to him through his chosen people. To accomplish this, God gave them many privileges. However, they squandered God’s blessings and privileges. They refused to live for his purpose. So God sent prophets to remind them and encourage them. But they killed the prophets one after another. God’s heart ached for his people. God longed to have a love relationship with them and to use them greatly for his purpose. God was like a mother hen. His chief desire was to gather his people together to protect them, nurture them, and raise them as his holy children. God wanted them to accept his love and be fruitful and happy. But they turned away to pursue their own petty concerns. Now they were rejecting the Christ, the promised Messiah. It was a terrible blunder.

Look at verse 38. “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” God’s work in Israel was always focused on the coming of the Christ. His coming gave meaning to their temple system, and their laws and their prophecies. When they rejected him, they lost everything.

However, Jesus still had hope. He foresaw the day of his coming again in great power and glory. He foresaw that the remnant of his people will welcome him on

that day by saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” People may fail, but God never fails.

God longs for each of us as a mother hen longs for her chicks. God wants to protect us, bless us, and raise us as a blessing to the world. But we must make a decision to accept God’s love and begin to share his heart for the world. Let’s accept God’s love and be a blessing.