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Called to Speak for the Lord – the Book of Jeremiah

The Incredible Hardness of the Religious Hypocrite

October 4, 2020

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 3

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 4

Much of the book of Jeremiah is the Lord setting forth His case against the wicked people of Judah. It is a repeated threatening and promising of disaster coming upon them from the north – from Babylon’s invading armies – and all of this as a result of their own willful rejection of the Lord who had done them so much good.

We see then, through Jeremiah’s words, the nature, certainty and intensity of the wrath of God against the wicked. Sinful, evil Judah is a picture of mankind’s refusal to acknowledge and give thanks to God. And it is a picture

of the terrible, eternal, and just sentence of the wicked to an eternal hell.

Jeremiah also repeats another theme. It is the mercy and longsuffering of the Lord with sinners, and of His promise to preserve for Himself a remnant. This remnant will be the true Israel with hearts made new to love and obey God. Watch for these themes as we go through this book and you will see them repeated.

Part of this chapter in fact looks away into the future – to our day and also to a day that is still future to us. Jeremiah speaks especially toward the end of the chapter of a time of genuine contrition and repentance, and a time when the Lord would call His true people – his remnant –

I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. (14b)

There is no harder hearted, willful kind of person than the religious hypocrite. As Jeremiah describes his countrymen and announces God’s judgment upon

them, also calling them to repentance over and over again, you will see this hardness and this *hypocrisy*. Look at the first few verses of chapter 3 –

Jeremiah 3:1-5 ESV “If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD. (2) Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.

(3) Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed.

(4) Have you not just now called to me, ‘My father, you are the friend of my youth— (5) will he be angry forever, will he be indignant to the end?’ Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.”

The first few verses are a reference to the Law which prohibited a man

divorcing his wife, then another man taking her and divorcing her, and then that first husband taking her back. This was largely, no doubt, for the protection of the woman.

Now, one of the chief sins of Judah (you will see it described repeatedly in Jeremiah) was idolatry. And that idolatry was portrayed by the Lord as spiritual adultery. The Jews were bound to God by covenant, yet they were unfaithful to that covenant and God divorced them, handing them over to judgment. Here then He is challenging their hypocrisy. They polluted the land with their evil, by their sin they brought a curse upon it, they were unrepentant about it all, and God was already urging them to repentance by bringing various chastisements upon them – such as withholding the rain. *Yet they had the forehead of a whore, they refused to be ashamed.*

Now, here is the amazing thing about the religious hypocrite. In the midst of all this willful wickedness and despising of the Lord, *they call out to Him!!* They still came to the temple. They offered sacrifices. They called themselves His people and expected Him to bless them. And you see this here in verses 4-5:

(4) Have you not just now called to me, ‘My father, you are the friend of my youth— (5) will he be angry forever, will he be indignant to the end?’ Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.”

Some commentators like Matthew Henry and Calvin take these words as a prediction of God’s mercy upon them. That one day they would genuinely call out to Him as their father, and His anger would end. But as John Owen comments in Calvin’s commentary (which Owen translated), this cannot be the right meaning. Why? Because of the last sentence – “Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.” Those are God’s words and in them He is identifying the real heart of these hypocrites. *They speak these words, they call God their Father, they insist that He must forgive them, but in fact they go right on doing every evil they possibly could.*

I have a stack of letters and emails from people who have been the victims of counterfeit religious entities which call themselves Christian churches – but they are not. They use pious sounding words. But just like Jeremiah’s countrymen, they walk in evil and in

rebellion against God behind their outward whitewash of “holiness.” And they ALWAYS oppress the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Always.

In contrast, consider the words of the genuinely repentant as Jeremiah looks ahead to a day when the Lord’s true people will authentically repent:

Jeremiah 3:23-25 ESV Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel. (24) “But from our youth the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers labored, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. (25) Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonor cover us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.”

See it? There is no presumption here. There is no demand that God must forgive them. There is a full confession of sin and an admission that they deserve nothing but God’s wrath. No excuses. It really is this:

1 John 1:8-10 ESV If we say we have

no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

It is very, very important for us to understand and be able to identify religious hypocrisy like this. To know what the counterfeit people of God look like, lest they deceive us and put their false gospel on us. I do not hesitate to say that many if not most local churches today are infested with this very evil.

Jeremiah 3:6-10 ESV The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: “Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? (7) And I thought, ‘After she has done all this she will return to me,’ but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. (8) She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. (9) Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted

the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. (10) Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.”

Now, once more we are considering the amazing depravity of man, and in particular the incredible hardness of the religious hypocrite’s heart. The most evil sinner of all, I am certain, is the religious sinner. The one who claims to belong to the Lord but is a liar, a fake and a fraud. These are the kind that we must not permit to creep in among us because their intent is to lead us away from Christ and exalt them instead. They also do huge damage to the real church’s ability to preach the gospel to the lost.

So look closely at verses 6-10. *In the days of King Josiah*. Do you remember what was happening at that time under this godly king when the Scriptures were once again discovered and read to him?

2 Kings 23:1-8 ESV Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. (2) And the king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him all

the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD.

(3) And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.

(4) And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the threshold to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron and carried their ashes to Bethel. (5) And he deposed the priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem; those also who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and the moon and the constellations and all the host of

the heavens. (6) And he brought out the Asherah from the house of the LORD, outside Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron and beat it to dust and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people.

(7) And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the Asherah. (8) And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geba to Beersheba. And he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on one's left at the gate of the city.

Now, decades before, the northern kingdom had been wiped out by the Assyrians as the Lord's judgment for their evils. *And Jeremiah's point here is that Judah, the people of the southern kingdom, saw this happen.* They knew full well that Israel was destroyed because of their sins, particularly the sin of idolatry.

Then, godly king Josiah comes and he effects a revival and sweeping

reformation in Judah. But what was the result by apparently the majority of Jeremiah's countrymen? It was this:

(10) Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD."

But in pretense. Do you know what that word means? Here is the dictionary:

An attempt to make something that is not the case appear true. A claim, especially a false or ambitious one.

Their claim of returning to the Lord, in other words, was a lie. And here we see this amazing, mind-boggling hardness of the sinner.

Romans 1:32 ESV Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Sin leads to madness. It is insanity. And there is no deeper lunacy than this hypocritical lying religious lunacy:

Isaiah 1:2-20 ESV Hear, O heavens,

and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. (3) The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." (4) Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

(5) Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. (6) From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. (7) Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. (8) And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. (9) If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

(10) Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (11) “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. (12) “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?

(13) Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. (14) Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. (15) When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

(16) Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, (17) learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. (18) “Come now, let us reason

together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (19) If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; (20) but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

But they didn't, and they won't.

I regularly tell people – just about every single week, that the religious people who claim to be Christians but who are oppressing the weak, the widow, the orphan – are never going to repent. I tell them we can be sure of this. Many have been taught otherwise and so they continue to be held in bondage to these evil ones.

But Jeremiah and Isaiah make it plain, and we should see it plainly. These people the prophets confronted, these religious people who had a heritage of God's great blessing and who of late had been experiencing His chastisement for their sin and hearing Him call them to repentance, absolutely refused to repent. They refused even when the walls were collapsing all around them. *The religious hypocrite is the worst sinner with the hardest heart*

of all sinners. They are the reprobates of Hebrews 6:4-6. And get this:

Jeremiah 7:16 ESV “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

Jeremiah 11:14 ESV “Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble.

Jeremiah 14:10-12 ESV Thus says the LORD concerning this people: “They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet; therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.” (11) The LORD said to me: “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. (12) Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.”

And you can find the very same instruction to US in 1 John 5 –

1 John 5:16 ESV If anyone sees his

brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

I have had people, even the victims of these kinds of wicked ones, get very angry at me because I told them that their evil religious hypocrite spouse or parent or other such person was just like the people Jeremiah was called to pronounce condemnation upon. They complained that I was denying God’s forgiveness and grace and that *no one was beyond God’s salvation*. So they were adamant that they were going to keep right on being oppressed and keep right on praying for God to show their oppressor mercy and save them. This is foolishness and it is believing a lie.

There are many people who are beyond God’s mercy. Jeremiah’s entire nation consisted of just such people. The Babylonian armies *were going to come*. Listen again:

Jeremiah 5:1-2 ESV Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does

justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her. (2) Though they say, “As the LORD lives,” yet they swear falsely.

They spoke Christian-ese. They went through the motions of “church.” They called God their father in their prayers. But they were the most wicked people to be found and God’s wrath was upon them in greater measure than anyone else.

Do you see the application for us? Do you understand that there are certainly people just like this today in our churches and pulpits – make no mistake, the prophets and priests of Jeremiah’s day were leaders in all this. Therefore we are very foolish and we set ourselves up for all kinds of grief if we are now wise to these things. We will also waste huge amounts of time and energy on these hypocrites instead of putting them out from among us and working with people the Lord wants us to go to.

So be wise. Understand these truths. Learn from Jeremiah. And don’t ever, ever, ever be one of these kind.