

“The Rejection of Israel”  
(Matthew 23:13-39)

Solomon once wrote in the book of Proverbs 6:16-19, “There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness *who* utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers.” Remember that the book of Proverbs was written by the wisest man who has ever lived. When the Lord answered Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, He said to him, “Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12). Solomon wrote this book as a book of instruction, to teach us how to live lives that would be pleasing to God. Now realizing this is true, how can we not sit up and pay attention when He tells us that there are certain things God *hates*. If we know that God hates something, but do it anyway, then we are rejecting God. But the Bible shows us that the one who rejects Him will be rejected by Him. This is what Jesus tells us in our passage this morning.

This is now the last time that Jesus will rebuke the scribes and Pharisees. He still had a few more things He wanted to teach His disciples, but He was finished with those who didn’t believe. It would be only a few days now before He would be handed over by the leaders of Israel to the Gentiles to be crucified. Now that He had already warned His disciples and the people of Israel to be careful of the scribes and Pharisees, He turns to these leaders one last time to expose their sins and to pronounce God’s woe, or His curse, upon them. They had rejected Him, and now He was rejecting them. Let’s look briefly at what they were doing.

The first thing He indicts them for was the fact that they had shut the kingdom of heaven up so that no one could go in. John the Baptist and Jesus had opened the door by preaching the Gospel. But these men wouldn’t go in. They didn’t want to do what God told them. Not only did they refuse to go in, they also did everything they could to keep others from entering it by turning them away from Jesus and His Word. Jesus tells us in Luke 11:52 that they had taken away the key of knowledge – they had hidden the Gospel from God’s own people. They replaced it instead with their rites and traditions. They were the ultimate Judiazers – teaching the people to trust in the Law and in their circumcision, rather than in the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Instead of becoming a means of salvation to the people, as they should have been, they had become the means of their damnation.

The second thing He charges them with was devouring widows’ houses. They were swindling widows out of everything they had. The Bible tells us that God protects the widows and the orphans. He heart is full of compassion towards them. He tells His people that they should be the same way towards them. But these men were doing just the opposite. They took all that these widows had, even their homes. And while they were doing this, at the same time they were making long prayers, showing everyone how holy and spiritual they were. Jesus says that for this hypocrisy, they would receive even greater condemnation.

Thirdly, they weren't content just to be wicked themselves; they also had to make others like themselves. As good evangelists, they traveled over land and sea making converts, teaching them their ways, and at the same time, making them twice as much the sons of hell as they were, which means they were making them twice as fit for damnation. They were leading them down the road of man's works, and not the Gospel of His free grace in Christ.

Jesus also condemns them for the fact that they considered themselves guides to the blind, when they themselves were blind, in the forth curse. They were presuming to teach others the path to heaven, when they themselves were completely blind to that path. They didn't know where they were going. They would say that if a person takes an oath by the temple, he is not obligated to keep it. But if he makes it by the gold of the temple, then he is obligated to keep it. But the gold is only holy because of the temple, not the temple because of the gold. They did the same thing with the altar. If one swears by the altar, that is nothing, but if he swears by the sacrifice on the altar, then he is obligated. But again which is greater, the sacrifice, or the altar that makes the sacrifice acceptable? The one who swears by the altar, swears by the altar and everything on it; those who swear by the temple swear by that and the One who dwells in it; and those who swear by heaven swear by His throne and the One who sits on it. God considers these vows made to Him and He will hold them accountable for them. God alone is the name by which we are to swear, for making an oath or taking a vow is an act of worship in His eyes. Moses writes in Deuteronomy 10:20, "You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name."

Fifth, Jesus condemns them for tithing of the herbs of the garden, while overlooking the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness. The Lord wanted them to deal justly with their neighbors. He wanted them to show mercy to those who had offended them and to help those who were poor. He also wanted them to be faithful in keeping their vows and promises. These were the more important things He wanted them to do, without neglecting the others. God is a precise God. Even the small things are important to Him. But doing the small things wasn't enough if the larger things were being overlooked. He said they were straining at gnats – which would sometimes get into their wine or vinegar, and they would strain them out since they were unclean – but at the same time they would swallow a camel – the largest animal they were knew about that was unclean. In other words, they made a big deal over small matters, while they were committing large sins. Our Savior reminds us that there are those who are great at pointing out the specks in their brother's eye, while overlooking the log that is in their own eye (Matt. 7:3-5).

His sixth and seventh accusations are very closely related. They were great at making themselves look good on the outside, at making everyone think that they were so holy and spiritual. The outside of the cup and dish looked good. They were whitewashed so you couldn't see their flaws. But inside, in their hearts, in their souls, they were full of robbery, self-indulgence, the corruption of sin. Only the Gospel is able to make a heart clean, but they rejected it. Jesus told them that they needed to clean the inside of the cup and dish; they needed to receive Him, to be made clean through His atoning blood, but they refused. They were blind to the beauty of Christ, and so they would perish.

Lastly, He condemns them for pretending to honor the prophets and righteous men by building up their tombs and adorning their monuments, while at the same time

they persecuted their successors. They said that they would not do the same as their fathers, but by calling them their fathers, they were bearing witness against themselves that they were their children. The fact that they were even then plotting to do away with Jesus was another indication that they were the true children of their fathers. Jesus was bringing the same Gospel they had, and therefore was being treated the same way. It's easy to honor the dead, since they can't do anything to hurt you anymore. But it's quite a different matter to honor those who continue to preach the truth, especially if that truth is convicting.

And so Jesus says, "Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers," that is, "Finish the job they started. Finish killing those who bring you the Gospel. I know that you are going to kill Me and My disciples. You are serpents, the offspring of snakes. You share the same nature as your father, the devil, and for this reason how can you possibly escape the judgment that he will have to face? You can't. In My mercy I will send more prophets, wise men and scribes, more of the same your fathers persecuted, and yet you will persecute them – you will scourge, kill and crucify them – so that the blood of the all the righteous – from the blood of the first martyr Abel, to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered – yes all the blood of the righteous will fall on this generation. You have rejected Me for the last time. Now judgment will come."

Now when Jesus said this, He wasn't being vindictive. He even laments and weeps over His people, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (v. 37). Many times the Lord had wanted to gather His people to Himself. Many times He desired their repentance and sent His prophets to warn them. But they were unwilling. Now God's patience was at an end. "Behold," Jesus said, "Your house is being left to you desolate." The abomination which makes desolate was not far off – the destruction of Jerusalem. Notice that Jesus calls Jerusalem 'your house' – 'your house is being left to you desolate' – and He doesn't say 'My house' or 'the house of the Lord.' God was giving them over to destruction. He was withdrawing His presence for their rejection of His Son and His Gospel. This is really what chapter 24 is all about. The glory of Israel was departing. Jesus said, "For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" Jesus was leaving. Everything the Temple, the sacrifices, the feasts and the institutions of Israel pointed to was here, but they would not receive Him, so He was departing. This was the last time they would see Him teaching publicly. The next time they would see Him is when He would come in judgment, when they would bow the knee to Him and declare Him to be Lord (Phil. 2:10-11).

Now this passage stands as a warning to us that we should not do the same things that they were doing – we shouldn't hide the Gospel of God, take advantage of the poor, turn people to our own ways and not the Lord's, make small matters of the greatest importance while we neglect the more important things, try to look good only on the outside and not on the inside, honor dead saints while persecuting the living, and many other things which we know the Lord hates. We must be careful not to reject the Gospel, or we will be rejected by the Lord. If we reject Christ, His way of salvation, His will for our lives, or even His people, then we will have to face the same judgment as these Jews. The Lord takes His Word seriously. He will destroy His enemies.

But thankfully, all those who take hold of Christ will be saved. The Bible says that if we receive Him, if we receive His way of salvation, if we turn from our sins and do His will and love His people, we will not face judgment, but be saved. No one who has trusted in Christ has ever been disappointed and ever will be. If you have never received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I would invite you to do so now. If He is calling you this morning, trust in Him now. But for those of you who do know Him and love Him, I would ask you to prepare your hearts now to come to the table. The Lord calls us again to remember His death, to remember that when He was handed over the Gentiles to be crucified, it wasn't just because of the wickedness of these Jews. He died to save us. He willingly laid down His life so that we might have life. And now He offers Himself to us everyday to forgive us and to strengthen us by His grace. Let us bow and prepare our hearts to meet Him at His table and to receive His blessings.