

JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE

Verna sat with her sister on the porch, sipping hot tea and watching autumn leaves drift from the trees. Her sister, Emma, had surprised her with freshly baked cookies.

Across the street, a man waved. "Hi, Mrs. Gibson," he yelled.

"Hello, Pastor Hillard!" Verna waved back. She tried to mask her discomfort with a smile.

As he got into his car and drove out of sight, Verna leaned toward her sister. "He's the Pastor of the Alpha Church over on Burnside Road. He's visited the widow across the street every week since her husband died three months ago. I think it's strange for him to be over there so often."

"Maybe he's helping her with some legal issues. He used to be a lawyer a long time ago." Verna's sister took a sip of her hot tea.

"I just got a feeling." Verna softly touched her sister's hand.

"I don't know," her sister said. "Maybe you've just been listening to your true crime podcasts too much."

Eight months later, Verna walked outside to get her newspaper. She unfolded it and saw a picture of Pastor Hillard with the headline: "Widow Scammed Out of Life Savings by Community Leader."

Verna texted her sister: "I was right. Take a look at the newspaper!"

Emma took a few moments to respond: "I cannot believe it! That poor woman trusted him. Now he is in trouble with the Lord and the law!"

1 What are some examples of religious hypocrisy that you have seen or experienced?

2 Which is better, having the right words or having the right attitude behind our actions?

3 Where have you felt stretched to take a risk to help others?

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ² Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say,

Hear the word of the LORD, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the LORD. ³ Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. ⁴ Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these. ⁵ For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; ⁶ If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: ⁷ Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever. ⁸ Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.

¹ This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message:

" 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. ⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

Misplaced Trust in the Temple

Boldly standing at one of the temple gates, Jeremiah announces the Lord's message (7:1). When first called by God to be His prophet, Jeremiah was reluctant, but here, he faithfully says exactly what God commands (compare Jer. 1:6 from last week). In the ancient world, people typically made proclamations at gates as visible public places. Anyone doing business in the temple would have to pass through a temple gate, so Jeremiah's position gives him access to a wide array of worshipers.

Jeremiah's message is this: if the residents of Judah do not repent, God will not permit them to remain in the land (v. 3). He urges his

contemporaries to change their way of living. As part of God's covenant with Israel, God promised blessing and protection for those who obey Him (see Deut. 7:12–15). But an unfaithful, disobedient people is not entitled to receive these promises.

In verse 4, he commands everyone to stop trusting in deceptive words—lies. The people think they are safe with the Lord's temple in their land. The phrase “the temple of the Lord” repeats three times, emphasizing that they are trusting the temple rather than God Himself.

Verses 5–7 specify what the people must do to remain in the land. They must change their ways and act fairly. They must stop oppressing foreigners, fatherless children, and widows. In the Mosaic law, God shows a particular concern for these three groups, who were especially vulnerable and unable to protect themselves (see Ex. 22:22–24). There can be no shedding of innocent blood or worshipping of other gods. If (and only if) they do these things, God will allow them to continue in the land. At the end of verse 7, Jeremiah recalls that God gave the land to their ancestors “for ever and ever.” God desires that they stay in the land, but their actions jeopardize the covenant relationship.

1 What is the desired outcome of Jeremiah's message?

2 What do the people trust instead of God?



This stele from the eighth century BC depicts Ishtar standing on the back of a lion. In Jeremiah 7:18, the prophet accuses the people of Judah of making their offerings in then temple, then going out to make separate offerings to the “Queen of Heaven,” who is probably this Mesopotamian goddess of power and sensuality.

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⁹ Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; ¹⁰ And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations? ¹¹ Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD.'

²¹ Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh. ²² For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: ²³ But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.

⁹ "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.'

²¹ "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! ²² For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, ²³ but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.

God Desires Obedience

Jeremiah diagnoses his audience the way that a doctor diagnoses a patient. Based upon the symptoms, he knows the people of Judah have a spiritual problem. He accuses them of breaking God's commands (vv. 9–10), listing six specific violations of the Ten Commandments: stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely, offering sacrifices to other gods, and following other gods (see Ex. 20:1–7). But the most shocking symptom of all is that, even after committing these obvious wrongs, the people enter the temple believing themselves "safe" (Jer. 7:10). Naively, they believe their temple sacrifices are enough to keep faith with God. But the actions

reveal that they completely misunderstand what God desires in the first place.

Verse 11 emphasizes that the temple is the Lord's house—it bears His name. But it has become a “den of robbers.” In the ancient world, robbers would use caves for protection and shelter when being pursued. Once the danger had passed, they would leave the caves to commit more crimes. Similarly, God's people are viewing the temple as a refuge that protects them from the consequences of wrongdoing.

Through Jeremiah, God sarcastically tells the people of Judah to add the burnt offerings to other sacrifices and to eat the meat (v. 21). According to the Mosaic law, burnt offerings were completely consumed on the altar and reserved for God alone (Lev. 1:6–9). But because the people are offering sacrifices while disobeying the law, their burnt offerings are unacceptable. They might as well just eat them; they do not matter to God (compare Jer. 6:20).

Finally, verses 22–23 conclude with a rhetorical contrast between the commands of sacrifice and the commands for obedience. The people could legitimately say, “God told us to offer burnt offerings and sacrifices when He brought us out of Egypt, didn't He?” Sacrifices and offerings certainly are important to the covenant relationship (see Lev. 1–4). Sacrifices treat the presence of God with care and allow for fellowship with a holy God. But if sacrifices are meant to demonstrate gratitude and communion, they are obviously not enough on their own. God wants obedience and devotion from the heart.

1 If the people of Judah are like a sick patient, what are the symptoms of their spiritual condition?

2 What has turned God's temple into this “den of robbers” as Jeremiah describes (v. 11)?

3 What has made burnt offerings meaningless in God's sight?

God Seeks Justice for the Vulnerable

God designed people to live in community. Humans were not made to be alone, nor do they often desire to be. At the time of Jeremiah's speech, foreigners were encroaching upon the land God had promised Israel, and parents and husbands were passing away, leaving their children as orphans, their wives as widows. The culture of ancient Israel was family-based; family members provided for one another, looked out for one another, sought justice for one another. But foreigners, orphans, and widows would have had no one to look out for them.

From this passage, we know that God was looking out for them. He rebukes His people for preying on the innocent and the vulnerable and commands them to change their ways. God becomes angry on behalf of the oppressed, righteously indignant that His people would sully His name by stealing, murdering, lying, or committing adultery. He reminds Judah that He is watching their behavior outside the temple walls. If they would not protect the vulnerable and seek justice, God would jealously defend His own reputation.

What is especially striking about this passage is that, in the midst of indicting the people for lacking mercy, God shows mercy. He repeats His commands with a promise that, if they reform their ways, He will let them remain in the promised land. If God were without mercy, He could have simply swept them away without warning. Instead, He pleads with them so that they might be saved.

We are familiar with the pattern. God loved us, so that we may love others. God showed us mercy, so that we may show mercy. God wants people to walk in obedience. He desires devotion to His purposes, a real relationship instead of a false view of religion. God is still looking out for the vulnerable and requires believers to do the same.

1 Why is the defense of the vulnerable so important to God?

2 What is an area of your life where God has been merciful to you?

3 Who do you know who could use protection, comfort, or provision?

No Substitute for Relationship

While we do not offer animal sacrifices or burnt offerings today, we can still be tempted to treat our relationship with God as instrumental. We can look at our church attendance, ministry success, or record of giving as if these are what God wants, more than the relationship we should be pursuing.

Can you think of something *good* (like church attendance, service, or giving) that you have treated as a stand-in for a genuine relationship with God? Ask God to change your perspective.

Key Text

But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.

—Jeremiah 7:23 KJV

I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.

—Jeremiah 7:23 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of October 13 through October 18

- Mon.** Proverbs 23:29–35—The Dangers of Strong Drink.
- Tue.** Ecclesiastes 9:4–10—Keep Earthly Pleasures in Perspective.
- Wed.** Ephesians 5:11–19—Be Filled with the Spirit.
- Thu.** Numbers 6:1–8—The Nazirite Vow.
- Fri.** 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7—Called to Holiness.
- Sat.** 1 Thessalonians 5:1–10—Keep Awake!

Next Week: Jeremiah 35:5–11

Next week we will talk about the good that comes from following family traditions. Use this week to think about one family tradition that you will want to share with the group.