

# Sermons on Matthew Desolate Religion\_

*Matthew 23:37-39*

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
pastorpaul@integrity.com  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
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# Desolate Religion

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**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets \_\_and stones those who are sent to her! How often \_\_I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks \_\_under *her* wings, but you were not willing! <sup>-38-</sup> See! Your house is left to you desolate; <sup>-39-</sup> for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, \_\_‘ *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord*’ (Matthew 23:37-39)!**

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## **Introduction—Church Supplanting Christ**

Temples, priests, altars, oaths, sacrifices are all things we see in the Old Testament—things mandated by God Himself. These things had one expressed purpose, which was to uphold and foreshadow the person and work of Christ. Jesus taught:

***\_\_You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and \_\_these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).***

But the sad irony here is that the very religious system or economy created by God to glorify His Son supplanted His Son. They venerated (worshiped) the church (more accurately their own roles in the church) more than they venerated Christ who is the head of the church and for whom the church was established (Colossians 1:18).

These pathetic priests, who were responsible for the spiritual welfare of Jerusalem (which in this context needs to be understood as the center of religious life) forgot that they were merely “vinedressers” (tenant-farmers (Matthew 21:33) caring for another person’s property. They didn’t want the church to be about God the Father and God the Son. They wanted the church to be about them and their pride and their prosperity.

And when God would send servants (prophets) to remind the vinedressers of their proper roles they would stone and kill them (Matthew 21:35).

Finally God would send His own Son to remind them of their ministerial roles, they would kill His Son thinking they would have the preeminence rather than Jesus (Matthew 21:38). When Jesus told the parable explaining this to these sinful shepherds of Israel, it became clear that this would end with God bringing His wrath upon them.

**Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they \_\_perceived that He was speaking of them (Matthew 21:45). -**

It was because of their hard-hearted rebellion and resistance to the clear call of God in their lives and ministries that “**\_the kingdom of God**” would be taken from them and given to a “**nation bearing the fruits of it**” (Matthew 21:43)—which would be the New Covenant church (1 Peter 2:9).

God is truly a patient God but His patience does not endure forever.

## **Jerusalem, Jerusalem**

Jerusalem, Jerusalem Jesus repeats, as if lamenting over their hopeless estate. How often they had heard the truth proclaimed to them and how often they hardened their own hearts. The warnings that compassionately come from the mouth of God end when it becomes clear that they’ve been understood and fully rejected—when there is no chance for remedy.

**And the Lord God of their fathers sent *warnings* to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending *them*, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. <sup>-16-</sup> But \_\_they mocked the messengers of God, \_\_despised His words, and \_\_scoffed at His prophets, until the \_\_wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till *there was no remedy* (2 Chronicles 36:15, 16).**

I recently spoke to a retired athlete who told me how often his coaches would invite him to church, prayer meetings and Bible studies. He remedied this problem by making it clear that he was serving the devil

rather than God. To what extent that was true or just said for effect, I cannot say. But there is clearly a point of no return for both individuals and the different types of bodies those individuals form, whether cities (which is usually how communities were defined in ancient times) nations, families or churches. Jerusalem, as a religious community had reached a place where there was no remedy for them but judgment.

## **Ones Killing the Prophets**

Jesus defines Jerusalem as **the one who kills the prophets \_\_and stones those who are sent to her!** Literally the ones “killing the prophets and stoning the ones sent to her.” It is in the present, active tense. Stoning and killing God’s prophets were not merely something they did, it is what they do. It is the very definition of who they are.

Jesus had no forgotten what He said earlier:

**A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench (Matthew 12:20).**

It’s not as if Jerusalem was governed by those desiring to be just, merciful and faithful but were struggling against the weakness of their own flesh. When by the grace of God we seek to pull ourselves out of a hole, Jesus doesn’t get fed up and put His foot in our face. But when men willfully **“refuse to heed, shrug their shoulders, stop their ears and make their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the prophets...great wrath comes from the Lord” (Zechariah 7:11, 12).**

We must be ever wary of those who resist or seek to quell the prophetic word of God. The devil is both ruthless and cunning. In some places the word of God is still greeted with the sword. But the enemy is subtle as well. A pastor friend of mine who is continually growing in his understanding of God’s word, thus making his sermons both more comforting, challenging and God-honoring, was himself challenged. Some members of his church said they were “concerned” for their pastor because he was becoming too theological. And, of course, as we all know, doctrine is divisive.

How would Paul or Peter or James or Jesus have responded to such a challenge? My wife thinks, “get thee behind me Satan” would have been the appropriate response. Especially when considering the words of John:

**- \_Whoever \_\_transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).**

People who resist doctrine are generally only resisting it because it is not the doctrine they wish to hear. Since the word 'doctrine' merely means 'teaching' *didache*, the only option to doctrine is to say nothing at all.

We may not have prophets today as we see in the Bible, but we do have the prophetic word contained in Scriptures and it must go forth and govern all things—first and foremost the church.

### **The Outward and Inward Calling**

Jesus both firmly and tenderly addresses God's covenant people. He speaks as one who continually wanted to bring these rebellious people under his tender care and protection—as a hen gathers and protects her chicks. We read in Ruth of...

**...the Lord God of Israel, \_\_under whose wings you have come for refuge (Ruth 2:12).**

This is one of those passages often used as a proof-text against the sovereignty of God or the divinity of Jesus. If Jesus wants them to be saved, and as God has the power of election and the power to save, how can His purposes be thwarted since what He wanted *ethelesa*, they did not want *ouk ethelesate*?

Those who hold this position, not only willingly ignore the numerous passages in the Scriptures which testify to God's election, sovereignty and governing of every bird the flies and falls to the ground, they also fail to discriminate between the outward universal calling and the inward efficacious calling of God.

Preachers preach that all should call on Christ—and rightly so. But we know that only those who have the efficacious call (inward call) will respond. The gracious and loving outward call of God should be brought before all. God outwardly calls all men without distinction. But it does not follow that God also inwardly calls all men without exception—some things are left to God and His decisions in the hidden chambers of eternity.

It might be asked if God is insincere by bringing the outward call without bringing the inward call as well. But of course, it must be then argued here that Jesus didn't even know if they would respond, for how

would it be a sincere offer of salvation (using that thinking) if you know they will not respond (which Jesus did know—Matthew 23:34). This can be very confusing and there is much more that can be said here, but not now.

## **A Maternal Kindness**

What can be said now is this: Jesus tenderly calls sinners to come to Him. Here the gospel is said to be affectionate with a “maternal kindness”.<sup>1</sup>

And since the Scriptures do teach that man is responsible for his own sin (regardless of how we understand sovereignty), the kindness conveyed in the words of Jesus here heightens the criminality and disdain of those who monstrously, not only reject the truth, but attack the truth, seeking to destroy those who bring it; whose feet, in another Scripture, are said to be beautiful because they “**preach the gospel of peace**” (Romans 10:15).

Let us be careful to avoid being like Moses when we speak for God. Let us be wise enough to avoid striking the rock when we are called to merely speak to the rock (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:8). There are times for a forceful presentation and threat of judgment and there are times when the gospel is compared to a mother hen beckoning her dependent little creatures who find warmth, comfort and protection.<sup>2</sup>

## **Increased Grace or Judgment**

Let us also recognize the kindness of God in the act of fetching our ears to His message will either be a source of increased grace or increased wrath.

**Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three \_\_witnesses. <sup>-29-</sup> \_\_Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, \_\_counted the blood of the covenant by which he was**

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin’s Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 23:37). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**sanctified a common thing, \_and insulted the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:28)?**

This was precisely what was happening. God forbid we follow their example of rebellion. For even though the New Covenant church would replace Old Covenant Israel, the grace is still there as is the threat.

Simply because the Jews as a people were in rebellion did not mean they were, to a man, in rebellion. Paul teaches that if they did not **“continue in unbelief”** they would be “grafted in again” as was the case with many. He also teaches that gentile believers that do not continue in the faith will be cut off as well (Romans 11:19-24). In a certain respect the warning stands for all generations.

In another respect the warning had unique historical significance.

**See! Your house is left to you desolate (Matthew 23:38); -**

### **A Spiritual Desert**

Jerusalem as a religious community had become a spiritual desert. Significant that Jesus refers to it as **“Your house”** and not “God’s house.” Let the modern church take note. It is not the ‘people’s church’ it is ‘God’s church’. The primary function of the church is not the well-being of man but the glory of God. But of course there is nothing better for man than to have the glory of God as its chief pursuit.

The Old Covenant church had reached a point of no return in its rebellion. That which at one time was set apart by God as the outward manifestation of His own glory, the holy of holies, the seat of mercy, the priestly sacrifices and all things foreshadowing man’s only hope of life and peace in Christ had become desolate, devoid of any redeeming content. Much is said of the ‘abomination of desolation’ spoken of by Daniel (Daniel 9, 11, 12). Whatever even that abomination of desolation is, it would be seen by the students of Jesus and it would signal their departure from Judea into the mountains to avoid the soon-coming judgment (Matthew 24:16).

Churches rejecting the living Christ become houses of desolation. Heaven is shut to those who attend, and the surrounding cultures and nations which fall under their influence eventually descend to cruelty and oppression thus incurring God’s judgment. Those who refuse to be under God will be under man and the result is terrifying. In such a case we thank

God for His judgments. In such cases the words of Habakkuk become the words of all the godly.

**O Lord, how long shall I cry, \_And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, \_\_“\_Violence!\_” And You will \_\_not save. <sup>3</sup> Why do You show me iniquity, And cause *me* to see \_\_trouble? For plundering and violence *are* before me; There is strife, and contention arises. <sup>4</sup> Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the \_\_wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:2-4).**

For the godly, the judgments of God are preferable to the advancement of the wicked. And when churches wax cold, their cultures inevitably follow, as do God’s judgments. Preferable to all of this is faithfulness.

**for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, \_\_‘\_Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord’ (Matthew 23:39)!**

These are Christ’s last words to an impenitent nation. Some understand these words to refer to the response of Israel when He comes to establish His millennial kingdom. I respectfully disagree, since I believe Jesus has started His kingdom and currently reigns as King of kings the Lord of lords.

So what does this mean? These words had become a bit of a chant. The multitudes cried it out in Jesus’ Triumphal Entry (Matthew 23:9). Jerusalem would soon chant these words, but as Calvin points out “when it is too late”.<sup>3</sup>

After the crucifixion of Jesus the centurion, having witnessed the earth quaking and rocks splitting and the dead coming from their graves confesses “**Truly this was the Son of God**” (Matthew 27:54). But that doesn’t necessarily mean that he had a saving faith. Paul teaches of a time when “**every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord**” (including those under the earth—Philippians 2:10, 11). But that doesn’t mean that every bowed knee and confessing lip is a child of God. Even the demons give Jesus the title: “**Jesus, You Son of God**” (Matthew 8:29). This does not mean they were believers in the salvific sense.

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin’s Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin’s Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Many of these Israelites would live to see the judgment of God fall upon Jerusalem (which would happen within about forty years). This would mark the clear end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the full expression of the kingdom of God with power (Mark 9:1). The High Priest Caiaphas put Jesus under oath and asked Him: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!\_”

**Jesus said to him, “\_It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, \_\_hereafter you will see the Son of Man \_\_sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:63, 64). \_”**

That cloud of judgment is the context for this and the next chapter. It would be in the judgment that the truth of those words would become clear. Let us not have the faith of demons or those in rebellion, allowing our own words to become a witness against us (Matthew 23:31). May our confession of faith sound from our lips, only because it proceeds from our hearts.

### Questions for Study

1. What was the purpose of the Old Covenant system of temples, priests, altars, etc. (page 2)?
2. How did the priests (Pharisees) handle their responsibilities as those who were to care for God’s people (pages 2, 3)?
3. What was about to happen to Israel (page 3)?
4. When do the warnings from God end (pages 3, 4)?
5. Does God’s judgment of Jerusalem mean He won’t help sinners? Explain (page 4)?
6. Is it bad to be theological (pages 4, 5)?
7. What is the difference between the inward and outward calling of God (pages 5, 6)?

8. Should the gospel be presented gently or forcefully? Explain your answer (pages 6, 7).
9. What happens if we reject the kind and compassionate call of God in our lives (page 7)?
10. How had Jerusalem become a spiritual desert (pages 7, 8)?
11. Does a profession of faith always mean genuine faith (page 9)?