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Matthew 23:29 - 23:33



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 23:29-33, in which Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who claim to honor the prophets that their fathers killed, while also plotting to kill Jesus and persecuting his disciples. Gregg explains the Old Testament imagery of a cup being filled with guilt and how the guilt of the Pharisees' fathers and their own actions will lead to the wrath of God being poured out upon them. He also touches on the idea of silencing messengers and destroying reputations as forms of punishment. Ultimately, Gregg reminds listeners that even God's own people will be judged and urges them to avoid hypocritical behavior.

Transcript

We're turning now to Matthew chapter 23 and resuming our studies in this chapter, beginning at verse 29. And this is a very interesting passage. Jesus says, Now is that gentle Jesus, meek and mild, making those statements? It is.

Jesus had a tongue, I'll tell you, a sharp tongue at times. And he knew how to use it to justly castigate and denounce that which was abhorrent to God. And one of the things that we find in Jesus' teaching that God abhors most of all is religious hypocrisy.

You know, Jesus, there are other things God hates. God hates adultery. God hates murder.

But we find God extending grace to murderers and to adulterers in Scripture if they are repentant. Jesus is very merciful and gentle with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners. That doesn't mean that he approved of what they had done.

But when they came to him, he was glad to show them mercy because they knew they were sinners and they didn't pretend to be otherwise. And they came to him in repentance, wanting to change their ways, and he received them. The thing about the religious hypocrisy is that the people who are religious hypocrites are sinners too.

They just don't acknowledge it. They do pretend to be otherwise. And this is what God finds very obnoxious.

And Jesus seems to have the most severe words of all his teachings are directed toward those who are religious people and hypocritical. Now, what does he say to them here? We have to understand what's going on here. Jesus makes reference to the Pharisees adorning the tombs of the prophets and saying that they would not have killed the prophets if they had lived in the days of their fathers who had done that.

This is a reference, this presupposes a certain knowledge of Jewish history. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people generally rejected the words of the prophets. There were very few of the prophets that ever found their words heeded.

Zechariah and Haggai were exceptions. They prophesied to the Jews that they should rebuild the temple with zeal and so forth and the people listened to them and obeyed them, which was a very unusual thing for the Jews. In most cases, certainly in the days of Ezekiel and before that, in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even before that, in the days of Elijah and Elisha and some of those prophets, these men, their words fell pretty much on deaf ears.

Well, not deaf, more properly hostile ears. And the Jewish people in their history generally did not at all welcome a word from God. And when he sent one by his prophets, they killed the prophets.

They persecuted the prophets. They killed them if they could, and many times they succeeded in killing the prophets. Isaiah was killed by Manasseh, the king of Judah.

He was sawn in two. Jeremiah was killed by his Jewish countrymen in exile in Egypt. We don't know how Ezekiel died.

There's no record of it. But many of the prophets were killed by their own countrymen. And, of course, later generations of Jews kind of looked back and said, wow, that was really a bad thing to do.

And so they made monuments in memory of those prophets. They said, well, these guys were good guys. And our fathers were wrong to do what they did.

And so they would memorialize these prophets who had been martyrs in their own day and build monuments over their tombs and so forth. That's what Jesus is referring to. He says you hypocrite because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous.

And you say, and this is what the Pharisees were essentially saying, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. In other words, what our fathers did was wrong, and we wouldn't have done that if we were there. Now, that's what most of us probably say.

We look back at the Garden of Eden and we say, well, if I were in the position of Adam

and Eve, I wouldn't have done that. Or we look back at the people who crucified Christ and say, well, if I was there, I wouldn't have done that. Or we look back at mistakes in history that our ancestors made and say, well, I wouldn't have made that mistake if I was there.

However, most of the time we're not telling the truth. We might think we are, but we're congratulating ourselves too much. We're giving ourselves too much credit.

We think we're more enlightened. We think we're better people than they. However, in our own ways, we often do exactly the same thing that they did.

Now, Jesus indicated that the Pharisees, no doubt they thought that they would not have repeated the sins of their fathers, but he said they were in fact going to fill up the measure of their fathers. And what he meant by that was that they were going to do the same thing their fathers had done in killing him. See, they were going to kill him.

And it would be no different than their fathers killing the prophets. He's saying you have not changed at all. You are just like your fathers.

The way he puts it is, therefore, you are witnesses against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Now, what's he saying? Well, what the Pharisees say is our fathers did this. They killed the prophets.

We wouldn't have done it if we were there in the days of our fathers. And Jesus says the very fact that you call them your fathers is an admission that you are their sons. And just as sons so often follow in the way of their parents and resemble their fathers, both in conduct and even in physical appearance, so your admission that these people who killed the prophets are your fathers is an admission that you are their sons.

And sure enough, you're going to act like your fathers, like father, like son. You admit that you are the sons of those who killed the prophets. And you, in fact, are going to fill up the measure of your father's guilt.

Now, this reference to filling up the measure of the father's guilt essentially refers to an image that is found frequently in Scripture. Back in the Old Testament, in Psalm 78, it refers to, it says, in the hand of the Lord there is a cup. And the wine in it is red.

And when it is full, he will cause the wicked to drink it. Many times in Scripture we read of the imagery of a cup of God's wrath. And I believe it's in Jeremiah chapter 25, if I'm not mistaken, or somewhere thereabouts, that Jeremiah in a vision is given a cup of wine to take around to the various nations and make the kings drink it.

And it represents them drinking of the cup of God's wrath. The imagery that is used in the Old Testament, and it comes up in the New Testament, too, is that, and it's just imagery, it's just a figure of speech, but it helps to understand a certain thing, that there

is a cup like a wine goblet which, as people or nations commit wickedness against God, it begins to fill that cup with guilt. And when that cup gets filled up, and there's no more room to fill it up anymore, it's reached its capacity, then God pours that cup out in the form of wrath upon people.

We see that in the book of Revelation, how we've got the seven goblets of wrath poured out on the earth in Revelation chapter 16. And these people are said to drink of the wrath of God which is poured out like wine in the wine cup of His wrath, and so forth. And the picture is this, that there's this cup, it has to be filled, and when it's filled, it's poured out.

It is filled up by the sins of a people. When it is full, it is poured out in the form of wrath and judgment on a people. And that is the imagery Jesus is using here.

He said to them, you will fill up the measure of your father's guilt. And the idea is that God tolerated much abuse for a very long time from the Jewish nation. He sent His prophets, and they killed them.

That added to their guilt, the cup began to fill up. The more they rejected the word of God, the more they killed God's prophets, the more that cup became filled. In fact, Jesus suggested it's not very far from being full right now.

He said, you will indeed fill it up. And He means by that, that in their rejection of Christ and their condemning Him to die, they would do that which fills the cup. Now, not only Him, but also as He goes on to say in the next verses, those that He sends.

When Jesus sent His apostles, the Jewish nation also, for the most part, at least the Jewish leaders, persecuted them too. They killed Stephen. They were guilty of the death of James, the apostle.

They pursued Christians through their agent Saul of Tarsus until he got saved, and then they pursued him to kill him. The killing of Jesus and of His disciples was going to be the thing that would fill up the measure of their father's guilt. And what He means by that is, once you have done this, there will be no more room to fill it up.

God will have to pour it out on you in the form of wrath. Because He goes on to say this, and then I'll make some more comments if I read these later verses. But He says, Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets.

This is Matthew 23, 34. Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes. This is a reference to the Christians, the apostles and preachers and so forth that God sends to them.

Some of them you will kill and crucify. Some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city. The apostle Paul was treated this way.

That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barakai, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. That is to say, from the time of Abel, when he was killed by his brother Cain, and up until this very generation that Jesus is addressing, His own generation of Jews, there was a cup of guilt being filled by every righteous martyr.

Every time they killed a righteous martyr, it added to their guilt. And He said, Now you're going to kill me, and I'm going to send to you messengers, and you're going to kill them and persecute them and scourge them and so forth. And this will happen so that all the guilt of this whole cup that's been filling for these hundreds of years is going to come down on your heads in this generation.

And it did. In 70 AD, just 40 years after Jesus uttered this, the most horrendous holocaust came upon Jerusalem in the form of the Roman invasion. There was a great war that lasted three and a half years.

It ended up with the destruction of Jerusalem, the slaughter of nearly a million Jewish people in the city, some of them slaughtered by their own countrymen, and the exile of a couple million of them off into foreign lands. And it was a terrible holocaust. Terrible.

Jesus said about it that it was the worst thing that had ever happened before or ever would happen since. It was a grave outpouring of the wrath of God on a people who had filled up the cup that their fathers had begun to fill. And so by killing the prophets, their fathers had accumulated, as it were, an account of wrath that was owed to them.

But it was not poured out until the cup was full. And these people, Jesus said, would fill it up themselves by what they would do, killing him and those that he sent to them. And it would be poured out, he said, on this generation, meaning the generation he was living in, they would experience the judgment.

Finally poured out, this cup of wrath poured out. And in the book of Revelation, I believe, we read about the fulfillment of this threat. We see the cup of wrath poured out on Jerusalem there in 70 AD.

Now, what about today? Is there any lesson for today? I mean, it's one thing to look back and say, well, historically the Jews did this, and this happened to them as a result, and so forth. Are there any lessons for 21st century Christianity or 21st century paganism, for that matter? You know, the idea that there's a cup of wrath that God eventually, once it's full, he pours it out on people. It's not restricted to his dealing with the Jewish nation.

Not at all. It is also applying to Gentile nations, because all nations, God has a claim upon them. God created the earth.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and all that dwell in it, it says in the

Psalms. And therefore, God has objection even to the heathens' misbehavior. And in Jeremiah chapter 25, beginning at verse 15, let me read you something here.

God tells Jeremiah, it says, For thus says the Lord God of Israel to me, Take this wine cup of fury from my hand, and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them. He says, Then I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to drink to whom the Lord had sent me, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and its princes, to make them a desolation, an astonishment, a hissing, and a curse as it is this day.

Okay, there it is. Jerusalem had to drink of that cup. That was, of course, in 586 BC when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem.

After they came back from Babylon, they filled it up again by the time of Christ. But it says, He also took it to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And it talks about Edom and Moab and Ammon and Tyre and Sidon and some of these other countries, Medes and Babylon is even mentioned.

All the nations had to drink this cup. And it says in verse 28, And if it shall be, if they refuse to take the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, You shall certainly drink. For behold, I begin to bring calamity on the city which is called by my name, meaning Jerusalem.

And should you be utterly unpunished? You see, judgment must begin at the house of God. God expects more from His people than He expects of the heathen. But if He eventually judges even His own people, how much more will He judge those who are His enemies from the beginning? And so the cup of wrath that Jeremiah carried around was symbolic of the fact that Jerusalem indeed was going to have to have the wrath of God poured out upon her.

But if that was true of Jerusalem, how much more would it be eventually of all the wicked nations? Now, one has reason to question in this connection, Is there a cup of wrath that America or Western society is filling up? And if so, how near is it to being full? You know, a lot of Christians would point out that there's been many, many millions of babies slaughtered through abortion. With the approval, not only of our government, but of our populace. How much innocent blood can be shed before it fills up that cup of wrath? And the other things, a nation that forgets God and that turns itself against God and forsakes God's teachings on family and on morality and just destroys its children.

Remember Jesus said, if a man would cause one of these little ones to stumble, He said it's better for that man to have a millstone put around his neck and put into the sea. Well, by the corruption of children in the public school systems and through children's entertainment and so forth, that turns children into idolaters and turns them into rebellious against their parents and so forth. This is something our country has been

doing for a long time and it seems to be intensifying.

I don't know. I cannot say because I have not seen this cup in God's hand. But I wouldn't be surprised if it was nearing fullness.

And if it was, then what can be anticipated is that God will pour it out upon us. However, in the Old Testament times, or even in the New, in 70 AD, when God began to pour out His judgment on the heathen, He first poured out His judgment on His people. That is His people who were disobedient.

He doesn't pour it out on His obedient people, but on those who are supposed to be His people but are acting like heathens. Peter said, judgment must first begin at the house of God. And if it begins with us, what shall the end be of those who are not Christians, who are disobedient? You see, God's people are supposed to be different.

We have the name of Christ upon us and if we don't live any differently than the world, then we corrupt our testimony and we fail in our mission and we bring judgment upon us. Would you say, oh, well, God doesn't judge the church. We're free from judgment.

God's not a judge of Christians. That's, I'm afraid, not what the Bible teaches. It would be handy if it was what He taught.

But Paul put it this way. Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 that some of the people in the church had died and some were sick. And this was a judgment from God on the church for its misbehavior at the Lord's table.

He says in verse 29 of, this is 1 Corinthians 11, 29, For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and some have died. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.

But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord that we may not be condemned with the world. Now, he's saying that people have died in the church and some are still sick, not having died yet, because there's been sin in the church. And if we would judge ourselves and get this sin out of the church, we wouldn't have to come under this kind of treatment from God.

But he says this is God judging us, chastising us, so that we won't, basically to bring us to repentance so we won't have to be condemned with the world. But God does judge the righteous. God does judge the company of the righteous.

He sorts out between the wheat and the tares, as it were, the wheat and the chaff, we could say. And there is a judgment that comes on God's people if they are not faithful to do what he has shown them to do. Now, the Jewish Pharisees and the Jews before them killed the prophets and eventually killed Jesus and those that were sent to him.

We, Christians, might say, well, we would not have done that had we been there, in which case we're saying the same things about ourselves that the Pharisees said about themselves. The fact of the matter is we can test that, because if somebody comes our way and challenges our beliefs or our protocol or our tradition and presents, you know, Scripture and says, now this is what the Bible says, why do you practice X? Why do you do this? Why do you teach that? Why do you believe such and such a thing? Why do you neglect this? Why do you do that? I mean, and points out from Scripture, the word of the Lord, that we are wrong. How quick are we to change? How quick are we to say, oh, I had better submit to the word of God rather than follow this tradition or follow this practice that I'm so accustomed to.

I had better humble myself and say, hey, I've been wrong, and succumb to the authority of Scripture. This happens from time to time, you know. Many times the traditions of our church are challenged by someone saying, hey, the Bible doesn't say that, and we need to go to the word of God and see whether they're right or not.

And if they are, rather than killing the person, or we don't kill people outright so much in our society, we might character assassinate them. We might do the equivalent of destroying their reputation. But the thing is, we thereby show ourselves to be of the same spirit as the Pharisees, who wanted to silence the one who was showing them that they were not doing what God wanted them to do.

The Jews did that to all their prophets. The Pharisees did that to Jesus and to his followers. The Sanhedrin did that.

And, by the way, the Christian church has done that throughout history, too. You no doubt have heard of the Inquisition. Well, we don't have the Inquisition today, and certainly not in Protestant circles, but we have the equivalent.

If somebody comes up and challenges our church traditions and says, where is that in the Bible? Show me in Scripture. And, you know, you are doing something that the Bible says not to do, or you're neglecting to do something that the Bible says to do. Many times our Christian groups are not the least bit interested in being taken to task on issues and shown that they're doing the wrong thing biblically.

And many times they will not kill the messenger, but they will do their best to silence him or discredit him. And this is really not much different. We need to be lovers of truth, lovers of the Word of God.

If we love our traditions or our stability or something else more, then we are in danger of making the same mistake the Pharisees made and coming under the same condemnation.