

Title: The Reluctant Judge
Text: Matthew 23.37-39
Theme: The judgment of God on rebellion
Series: Matthew #
Prop Stmt: God will judge rebellion even though he would rather show mercy.

This past Thursday, one of our college students, Parker McGoldrick left for Jerusalem where for the next semester he will be living and studying. He has promised to Skype us one Sunday morning, if possible, from a location in or near the very place where the text that we are studying occurred. This text not only takes place in Jerusalem, it is about Jerusalem. And as you will see, since it is about Jerusalem, it is about you.

Read Text:

Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as the King. Matthew paints a portrait of a king who is unlike any king that we have ever met. Once again, the heart of our king is displayed in a personal and painful way. Matthew organizes his gospel around 5 major teaching sections. The Sermon on the Mount (teaching 1) was followed by a series of miracles that Jesus did that validated his authority. This set the stage for his next set of instruction which prepared the disciples for their short-term mission trip. But, now the opposition starts to heat up (11-12) which leads to Jesus starting to teach in parables (teaching 3). Now, the pattern repeats: miracles, teaching, followed by opposition. We are at the end of chapter 23, where Jesus is responding to all of this animosity and hatred that has been hurled at him.

He has come to his people and has come to rescue them. He has repeatedly demonstrated his power to save (miracles), his compassion, his authority and his wisdom. No one teaches like him. No one heals like him. No one lives like him and no one leads like him. Clearly, he is the Messiah and yet he is hated. And this is so important for you to see and believe. I want you to see how Jesus responds instinctively to those who rebel against him. How does that compare to the leaders that you know? How do you respond to people who rebel against you? How do you respond to people that you have authority over and they resent you? The way you respond in your heart is determined by whether you care about them or if you only care about yourself. Let me give you an example.

In the late 1920's, Joseph Stalin was able to leverage the Bolshevik revolution in Russia for his own purposes and he managed to amass all of the governmental power into his hands. In order to live out the dream of socialism and then export this (through violence if necessary) to the rest of the world, Stalin pursued a two-prong course: forced industrialization and forced collectivization. In other words, the government took control of industry and farming. Peasants and villagers were forced to join collective farms where they had to meet certain quotas of production. These quotas were enforced, no matter what, which meant that the Russian government demanded that the people of the Ukraine region produce an unrealistic amount of wheat. They could not grow enough wheat to meet Stalin's quotas and enough to feed themselves. They began to rebel. Stalin responded by taking all of their food and by surrounding their villages with soldiers who,

after stealing all of their food, would not let any of them leave. The result was that millions of people in Ukraine starved to death from 1932-1933. If anyone was caught trying to tell the rest of the world what was going on, they were imprisoned and often executed. When our team was in Kiev, Ukraine recently, we visited the Holodomor Memorial, also known as the famine museum. It is a gripping and somber testimony of the ruthless response that man often has to people who disagree or rebel. Stalin, who ruled unjustly, stayed in power, through terror and fear. Christ, who rules justly uses his authority to magnify his mercy. Stalin murders and starves that he might be feared. Christ lays down his life and feeds that we might be loved and that we might love him in return.

Over and over, we see the mercy of Christ demonstrated in how he responds, but Christ is also just. He loves to be merciful. He loves to show his grace. He loves to redeem. He loves to rescue. He loves to forgive. But, for those who refuse to accept his authority, who refuse to call upon his mercy, who rebel against his right to rule, he will judge. He will judge reluctantly, but he will judge. He does not love to judge, but he will judge. He will judge with a breaking heart, but he will judge. So, while God will judge rebellion, he would rather show mercy.

I have organized this sermon around 4 questions and a concluding statement. My aim is to convince you of the reality of the justice and judgment of Christ so that you will rightfully respect him and not rebel against him. But, I also want to convince you of the greater reality of Christ's mercy so that you will love him, trust him, run to him, embrace him and happily accept his right to rule over your life in its entirety. And, my aim is to cause you to examine how you relate to those who are under your care and to see if you look like Jesus or like Stalin? Let's work through the questions.

I. **What is Jerusalem?** (37a)

Jesus repeats the name of this city because he is groaning as he says this. Jerusalem is unlike any place in the entire world. When we say "O", we say it from the gut. This is a cry of grief. This is a lament. This is the response of a soul that is in anguish. The anguish of Christ is not driven by what is going to happen to him in a few days, but the anguish of Christ is driven by what is going to happen to them. Jerusalem is obviously a city, but it represents more than that. There is a lot at stake because Jerusalem is a throne.

A. a throne

This is the city of kings. This is the city of palaces. This is the city where Melchizedek ruled as a king/priest during the days of Abraham 1000 years before David. This is the city David conquered and established as the capital of his kingdom. This is the city of David. This is the place where he established the throne of Israel and where kings in his line ruled for over 400 years. But David's throne was a preview of the throne of David's greatest Son, the Messiah who would establish his throne on David's throne. The throne of David, would give way to the throne of God. Therefore, to rule in Jerusalem was pretty heady stuff. But Jerusalem was not just a political power. Jerusalem is also a temple.

B. a temple

David spent the later years of his life preparing for a building project that he would never start, much less finish. The task of constructing a Temple fit for the God of Israel was left to David's son, Solomon who built a magnificent Temple. The most glorious feature of the Temple was a room that no one but the high priest could enter and he only once a year. In that room, called the Holy of Holies was one piece of furniture. It was a throne. Think about that. Jerusalem had two thrones. One was in a palace and one was in the Temple. One was the throne of man and the other was the throne of God. This anticipated the day when the final King would come and merge those two thrones into one. The throne was in the temple and under the throne was the law, the Scriptures. God ruled on the basis of His Word and his throne was called the mercy seat and the entire piece of furniture was called the Ark of the Covenant. In this Temple was a power, in fact the presence of person who was unlike any god or idol in the rest of the known world. Jerusalem was a throne, a temple and of course, Jerusalem was...

C. a city

While there are other cities in this world that are as old as and some possibly older than Jerusalem, no city has remained the focal point of the attention of the world like this one and for obvious reasons. Jerusalem is thought of and referred to as, the center of the world. She is not just a city, she is THE city. She is the city where God has chosen to place his name and therefore, she is loved or she is hated. Jerusalem is the place of thrones, wars, mosques, cemeteries, an old rugged cross and an empty tomb. She is the battleground of the conflict between Judaism, Islamic fundamentalism and Christianity. Though called the Holy City, she is more unholy than holy, more sinner than saint, more darkness than light. The Psalmist called her the city of the great God, while John called her Sodom and Egypt (Rev. 11.8). Jerusalem is at once a throne, a temple, a city and ...

D. a nation

As the capital, she represented the entire nation of Israel. The grief that Jesus expressed about the city was about the entire nation. While he was accepted by a remnant, he was rejected by the nation as a whole who said, "we will not have this man rule over us." But, honestly, it is not just Israel. Israel was a sampling of and a representative of the world.

E. the world

In the Old Testament, God's plan was to demonstrate to the world through Israel, what his kingdom was like. Israel was chosen to be a light that was intended to draw people to God. The OT prophets repeatedly spoke of when the Gentiles would come to love and worship God, and would come and worship God in Jerusalem. The rejection of Christ by Jerusalem was a rejection of Christ by the world. It is no wonder that Simon Montefiore opens his critically acclaimed work on the city of Jerusalem with these words, "*The history of Jerusalem is the history of the world.*" And so it is here, right here, right now, that we are in Jerusalem. And here is Jesus. Jesus, the God-man, the One who was the

person where God became man, was in the city where God dwelled with man, and where God would die for man, so that man could dwell with God. Here in Jerusalem is the city where it was all settled on a cross and in a tomb and where that settlement will be established in the end of days in the war between Christ and the anti-Christ. This is the focal point of the past, the flash point of the present and ground zero of the future. O Jerusalem. She is a throne, a temple, a city, a nation. She is the world.

II. Why do we hate the only One who can save us? (37b)

The history of Jerusalem is the history of martyrs. Many of the Old Testament prophets who dared to speak the truth would often pay for that courage and boldness with their own lives. With a few exceptions, Jerusalem has not been favorable to people who tell the truth. To be sent on a mission to Jerusalem would often mean that you were being sent to your death. Jesus knew that. Paul feared that. James experienced that. But why? Why do we hate the only One who can save us? Why do we hate those who tell us the truth? Why do we go to such great lengths to destroy the only One who actually has capacity to rescue us from our sin? The history of the world is like the history of Jerusalem. We tend to hate those who threaten to expose the truth about our lives.

Here is the truth: We were created in the image of God. God, in his infinite grace, created us with the capacity to love, relate, enjoy, create, explore, reason, think, respond, and communicate. That also means that God created us with a will. We all like sheep, have gone astray. We all like sheep have chosen to go our own way, the prophet Isaiah said. We took the gifts of the Creator and attempted to use them to elevate ourselves to the level of God. As if all that God has given us is not enough, we decided that we would not be satisfied until we were God. That way, we could make the rules. We could have everything that we wanted now! And even though God had warned us against it, we believed the lie of the serpent that we could eat the fruit, we could be like God, and we could have what we wanted without consequences. Whenever you hear someone telling you that you can whatever you want without consequences, listen for the hissss of the snake. The hisssss of those who preach that you can have your best life now is no different than the hisssss of Ashley Madison who says, "*life is short, have an affair*" because after all, no one will ever find out. Wait a minute, forget hackers, what about God!? Yes life is short. Life is short; love your wife! "You can have what you want without consequences" is a lie! But, we are so inclined to believe the hisssss of the snake who says you can have it all than the voice of Christ who exposes our need. Why? Why do we hate the only One who can save us? We hate Christ because loving him means that we have to admit the truth about our lives. Most people would rather die and go to hell instead of admitting the truth about their need and confessing their sins. That is stunning, but true. Most people would rather execute Christ in the most inhumane manner possible than admit their own need. We get violently angry when our sin is about to be exposed unless we really understand our need of Christ.

Let's say that you enjoy a very impressive reputation, but you know that the truth is, there is a lot of garbage in your soul. If your heart was hacked and publicly exposed, what you do? What would happen to your world? What would your enemies do if they knew the

secrets in your heart? Would you not be tempted to run away and never come back, if that were possible? But, what do you do about them now? How do you live with them? What can you do about them? Expose them! Expose them to the One who already knows all about them. Confess them to God. This is why we hate the only One who can save us. God knows too much. He knows the truth that we do not want to admit. But, in order to be forgiven, you have to be willing to let the Spirit of God hack your heart and expose it to God. You have to admit and own your sin. The truth is, most people would rather go to hell than do that. It makes no sense. But then, sin never does.

III. **What is the default response of Christ?** (37c)

“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...”

A week ago a terrorist attempted to go on a killing spree on a passenger train that was going from Belgium to France. On board was a father who saw the assailant coming and realizing what was going on, ordered his children to crouch down so he could cover them with his body. Before the terrorist reached him, two American soldiers met the terrorist and, let's just say dissuaded him from his pursuit of murder. Praise God for those soldiers! Now, we can understand the response of the father. He is a dad. He is willing to give up his life in order to protect the lives of his children. That makes sense to us. What doesn't make sense is giving up your life in order to protect the life of someone who had spent his life hating you. But that is what Christ is offering.

There is an absolute utter lack of malice on the part of Christ. This is pure mercy. “How often” i.e. I have looked and looked and looked for a way and for a reason to gather your children together and protect them. I believe that the reference that Jesus makes to the children of these people is because Jesus is looking ahead 40 years to the siege, starvation and destruction of the city of Jerusalem. He knows what is going to happen. If they do not run to him, they will have nowhere to hide. Just as Isaiah found out in Isaiah 6, only God can save you from God. That is what Christ came to do. He came to secure our pardon. He came to provide a way out. Christ did not come to mock you. Christ does not relish in your demise. Christ relishes in his mercy. He loves to show mercy. He loves to provide protection. The mercy of Christ is his hair-trigger response to our need. But, we have to admit it.

IV. **How does Christ respond to unrepentant rebellion?** (38)

Verse 38 is essentially a quote from Isaiah 64.11 and Jeremiah 12.7 and 22.5. Those Old Testament passages spoke of the day when the Babylonians would actually destroy the Temple, which they did in 586 B.C. Jesus uses those words to speak of the day when the Temple would once again be destroyed. Jesus is a reluctant judge, but he will judge and his response to unrepentant rebellion is severe. It is severe because it is just. But these words from Christ make it clear that the outpouring of his justice comes as an immense grief.

Thirty six years after the death of Christ, Jerusalem managed for a short time to rebel against Rome. Nero was in Greece in order to compete in the Olympic games when he was given the news. He dispatched the general Vespasianus to retake the city and destroy the rebellion. Vespasianus gathered his army, including his son Titus and began his march toward Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Jews discovered that rebelling against Rome was easier than living in peace. Jerusalem was drowning in her own blood as warlords fought one another for control of the city. It was only when news of Vespasianus' victory over Jericho that the warlords stopped fighting one another and prepared for the arrival of the Romans. But Vespasianus never came. The Emperor Nero committed suicide and within a matter of months, 3 more emperors came to the throne, only to be killed. Rome it seemed, not Jerusalem was on the verge of destruction. But now, Vespasian was proclaimed emperor and he sent his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem. The fate of Vespasian as emperor would be tied to the success of his son in the destruction of the Holy City. For four months now, Titus and his army of 60,000 soldiers laid siege and prepared to take the city. Verse 38 comes into a very sharp focus. Jesus repeated the prophets' words about the fall of Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonians. So, it should not surprise you to discover that Titus ordered the attack on Jerusalem to take place on the 9th day of the Jewish month of Ab, the exact day the Babylonians had destroyed the city over 500 years earlier. The siege began four months earlier when the city was packed with pilgrims for the Passover celebration. There were upwards of half a million people trapped inside her walls. The siege brought starvation, butchery and savagery that was only slightly less than what awaited her when Titus finally broke through her defenses. Gangs of men armed with weapons tortured and killed fellow citizens in search of food. They only stopped their mutual destruction when the Roman army set fire to their city and began to kill every person in their path. Rebels were crucified. Women were raped. Children were killed until the Romans were simply too tired to keep killing. They finally rounded up what was left and organized them into concentration camps that had been set up in the Temple Courts. There, the rest of the rebels were killed, the strong were sent to work in the Egyptian mines, the young and handsome were sold as slaves or selected to be killed fighting lions in the circus in Rome or displayed as booty in the victory parade in Rome which would conclude with the public execution of one of the warlords.¹

Her house was left desolate. The throne, the temple, the city, and the nation was in ruins. And every bit of her destruction was so completely unnecessary. The reluctant Judge carried through on his sentence, but it broke his heart to do so. But judgment will not have the final word.

V. **Even in wrath, God remembers mercy.** (39)

Jesus promises that the city will see him again. And when they do they will say, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*" The day will come when Jerusalem will realize that Jesus was their king and the only rightful heir to the throne. And on that day, which I

¹ The information and at times the phrases describing the fall of Jerusalem come from the preface of Simon Sebag Montefiore's work, Jerusalem, The Biography, Published by Knopf (a division of Random House), 2011.

believe is the day that Zechariah spoke about when they will mourn for him, he will come. He will come again and in what appears to be her final hour at the hands of the antichrist who embodies every Babylonian monarch, Roman general, Nazi Fuhrer, God-hater and Christ-rejecter for all time, Christ will come. And why would he come back to this city? He promises to return, even to the city of his death because the reluctant judge is an unabashed Savior! But if the judgment of God on rebellion from the reluctant judge is this intense, then what must the mercy of God be like for those who repent? So, let me put this together for you as clearly as I know how and then seek to help you absorb this personally.

God is perfectly just.

God's justice demands a response to rebellion.

God's judgment is God's reluctant response to rebellion.

Therefore,

God reluctantly, but faithfully and finally pours out judgment on unrepentant rebels.

But there is more.

God is rich in mercy.

God's mercy loves to respond to repentance.

God's forgiveness is God's hair-trigger response to repentance.

Therefore,

God instinctively, excitedly, faithfully, generously and abundantly pours out mercy and forgiveness on those who repent.

But how can this be? How can God have a hair-trigger response of mercy to those who repent, when their sin is so offensive to his righteousness? How can God seemingly overlook or discount his righteous offense against sin? He doesn't. God is free to pour out his mercy on those who repent because he poured out his judgment for their sins upon Christ. Christ, the God-man is both Judge and Rebel. Christ took credit for your sin and was treated as the one who rebelled against God. Therefore, if you die in your sins; if you die without repenting of your sins and trusting in Christ, you will face the wrath of God. He will pour it out reluctantly, but he will pour it out justly. But, that never needs to be the case. To my unbelieving friends – the destruction and judgment of Jerusalem was avoidable, so is yours. Confess your sin to God and admit your absolute and complete need of Christ to save you.

To my professing friends who are playing with sin. If you are a genuine believer, know this. Sin is not your friend. Sin will destroy you. Jesus is too merciful to sit by and watch you self-destruct. He will save you from yourself even it means exposing your sin in order to do so. Do not underestimate his relentless pursuit of you. Admit your sin. His mercy is on a hair trigger that is always activated by your repentance. If your playing with sin reveals that you are not a believer, you have no hope apart from Christ.

What is your hair trigger and what is your long fuse? Is the wrath of your judgment a long, slow fuse or a hair trigger? Is your anger a regular part of your response? Do your

kids or spouse tip toe around you? Is your mercy a long, slow fuse, meaning, that the people in your life have to wait a really long time for you to show affection, humility and grace? Here is your homework: Identify 3 characteristics of a person with a hair-trigger of judgment then identify 3 characteristics of a person with a hair-trigger of mercy. Ask the people who know you best to help you see which you tend toward.