

## **Going Through the Motions** **Jeremiah 26:1-19, 24**

So we're back in Jeremiah for the next few weeks. In between we're going to do a new series called the world upside down on why Christianity is so radically different from anything else on offer. But today, we're going to look at Jeremiah 26 and why people can go to church, and go through all the religious motions and it not change them.

### **Reading: Jeremiah 26:1-19, 24**

Look at v2, where the Lord says to Jeremiah, "Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord."

When Yuri Gagarin, the Russian Cosmonaut, and first man into space, returned to earth, Nikita Khrushchev, the Russian leader, gave a speech to the Communist Party conference and said, 'Gagarin flew into space, and didn't see any god there.' We visited his house and he wasn't there! If only he had been, we would have believed.

And that's not an uncommon attitude, is it? If only God would show himself to me, or intervene in my life in some dramatic ways, or answer my prayers for this relationship, or this job that I really want, or heal this person I love, then I'd believe, I'd go to church, I'd follow him.

And the Old Testament gives us numerous accounts of where God has done just that and revealed himself to people. And those experiences culminated with God's glory, his presence, coming and dwelling in the temple in Jerusalem, the house of God Jeremiah calls is, right in the midst of the people.

And here in chapter 26, the people were coming from all over Judah to worship there. And yet, Jeremiah tells them, v13, that they need to "Mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God". In other words, God had revealed himself to them, and they worshipped him at the place where his glory dwelt... but it didn't actually change the way they lived. It didn't change the kind of people they were. It didn't affect their values or behaviours. They were simply going through the motions of religion.

And that's not exactly uncommon, is it? I mean, maybe you can think of someone who goes to church, sings the songs, prays the prayers, listens to the sermon, leaves and carries on like nothing has happened. And you think, yup, that's their problem, they're just going through the motions. The problem is though, the moment you start pointing the finger at others, you're saying, it's ok for me to worship God *and* be judgemental of others! Which means that worshipping God isn't really changing you either! So, if we're really honest, all of us can find ourselves going through the religious motions at times, and worship of God doesn't change *us* like it should.

So, from this passage, I want you to see who does it, who goes through the religious motions without it changing them; why they do it; what's wrong with doing it, and how can you not do it - how you can worship God and it radically change your life for the better.

### **Who Does It?**

Look at v8, ‘And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, “You shall die!”’

So the first group are the priests and prophets. I’m going to call them the Religious Liberals. Going to the temple is their job, they’re like the pastors of the state church, or the academic theologians at the University of Jerusalem, and yet they really don’t like the idea that they and the people need to repent. In fact they get seriously angry about it. That’s the first group.

Then look at v10, ‘When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king’s house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the Lord.’ And they hear the accusations against Jeremiah, and his defence, and v16, “Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.” And, if you noticed, in v18 some of them even quote from the Bible, the prophet Micah, and how there’s biblical precedent for what Jeremiah’s doing. So these are the Religious Conservatives. They know their Bible, and they can quote it. And yet, despite the fact that they defend Jeremiah’s freedom of speech, there’s no more evidence that they actually repented and took his message to heart, than the religious liberals did. So they’re also going through the religious motions, but it’s not changing them.

Then, thirdly, there’s the crowd. The Fickle Crowd. And to start with they’re on the side of the Religious Liberals and are about to lynch Jeremiah. But when they hear the arguments of the Religious Conservatives, they swing to their side and defend Jeremiah’s right to speak. But still, just like their leaders, liberal or conservative, they don’t repent. They’re happy to come to the temple, but when they hear the word of God calling them to mend their ways and deeds, they don’t.

So all of them, religious liberal or religious conservative or the fickle crowd, in one way or another, they’re all going through the religious motions. God says to them, v4-5, “walk in my law that I have set before you, and... listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you.” But they don’t. They’re happy to come to the temple and worship, but they don’t allow the word of God to change them. And God says to them, v5, ‘you have not listened.’ They’ve heard his word, but it hasn’t gone from their ears to their hearts.

And the question is, why?

### **Why do they do it?**

Let’s look at the priests, the Religious Liberals, first. Verses 8-9, ‘You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate.’” You see, Jeremiah is saying, if you don’t repent, if you don’t bring your lives into line with God’s pattern, his law, then this city and temple, and you, are going to be destroyed.

And if you’re a religious liberal, that’s totally unacceptable, isn’t it: “why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord like that?”, they say. That’s not what God’s like. God doesn’t get angry at sin, he doesn’t judge people like that. That’s hate speech. He doesn’t have an opinion on how I use my money, or my time, or my body. That’s not what God’s like. God’s a god of love. He affirms me, he doesn’t ask me to change, or repent.

You see, we tend to make God in our own image, and we become our own law, and our own judge. And our worship can really become just a form of self-projection and self-justification - and its driven by our need to be affirmed.

But if that's where the religious liberals go wrong, you'd think the religious conservatives, the Bible-carrying elders and officials would get it right, wouldn't you? I mean, they even say, v19, "we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves". And yet, all that Bible knowledge doesn't seem to filter down to changing their hearts and mending their ways and deeds.

You see, there's a kind of orthodoxy that believes the Bible, that believes living a moral life is right, that believes God judges sinners, but it doesn't change you. Because you only allow it to go so far. Because you can think, I'm already good enough. In fact, it's those religious liberals who are the problem. They're the one's who aren't obeying God's law, they're the ones who are bringing disaster on society; they're the ones who need to repent.

And so, whilst the religious conservative can see the sins of others, especially the liberals!, he or she struggles to see his own pride, or anger, or insecurity, or racism, or self-righteousness, or greed. Because you can think, 'I'm already living a moral life, and God can't ask more of me than that.' Which is also a form of self-justification.

But then there's the fickle crowd. And one moment they want to lynch Jeremiah, v8, "You shall die!" The next, they're saving him, v16, "This man does not deserve the sentence of death". So one moment they're agreeing with the liberals: God accepts us as we are, you can't talk about judgement, that's hate speech! And the next they're siding with the conservatives and saying, 'no, Jeremiah's right, God does judge sinners and, judgement's coming'.

So what's going on with them?

Well, think about your own life: do you ever flip-flop between thinking 'God's a God of love, and loves me as I am, and talk about judgement sounds so harsh', to thinking 'I hate myself, I'm useless, God hates me, my life is a mess, I need to try harder'? Are there some days when life is good, and you're doing good, so God is good, and he must love you, 'cos you're doing good; and other days when you hate yourself, 'cos you're not doing well, and God is like a judge, standing over you, condemning you?

Or, are you so unsure of what you believe about God that when you hear someone say 'God accepts everyone, those religious conservatives are soooo judgmental', you think, 'yeh, you're right'. But then you hear someone else say, 'those liberals are destroying us, they're what's wrong with the world', you think, 'yeh, you're right'.

So, whether you're insecure in yourself, or you're insecure in your beliefs, you get blown about, and there's no lasting change.

Ok, but does any of this matter? Well, Jeremiah says yup, it matters a lot.

**What's wrong with it?** What's wrong with just going through the religious motions?

The other evening, Katie, Su and I went for a picnic in some fields near us, and we watched as a farmer stacked bales of hay with his tractor. And he picked one up, and stacked it on another. And

then he went and got a third, and put that one on top of the other two. Except that third one made the stack unstable, and it started to wobble, just as we were walking past. I thought, if that collapses we're goners!

And Jeremiah is saying to the people, look, if you carry on living the way you are, if you keep on adding to your sin, you are storing up disaster for yourself. You're putting yet another hay bale on the stack.

Much more tragically, there's a small mining town in Wales called Aberfan. And the owners of the coal mine stacked all the waste of the mine, all the rock and the mud, in an ever-growing slag heap above the town. And the heap grew slowly bigger each day as they put more mining rubbish on it. Until one morning, in 1966, that mass of rock and mud collapsed, sending tons of debris down into the town, burying the primary school that stood in its path, wiping out an entire generation of children. It was a disaster.

And Jeremiah says, if you go on living against God it's like you're putting more and more mud and rock on the heap. And at some point it will come crashing down on you.

So... if you're not yet a Christian, what this passage tells us is that one day you will face judgement ; there will be a day of reckoning. As one New Testament writer puts it, 'it's appointed for everyone to die once and after that comes judgement (Heb 9:27). Because, if you hear God's word, and reject it, it's really God you're rejecting.

But what if you are a Christian, and yet you recognise you also go through the motions - that you resent some aspect of God's character, or you keep him at arms length in some area of your life, or you oscillate between thinking God loves you or hates you?

Well, God isn't going to judge you like this. You're not going to be buried under your sin.

But look at v6, where God says, "I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth." You see, Israel had been chosen to be a blessing to the nations, and a light to the gentiles. But if she failed to walk in God's ways she was going to be sent into exile and rather than be a blessing, she'd be the opposite.

And there's a sense in which, if you're living a life as a Christian that's not in line with what God created you for, then you're living against the grain of creation - and you're never going to enjoy the closeness of God's presence that he wants for you. And, like Jerusalem, you're not going to fulfil your God-given potential to be a blessing to others and a light in dark places. Instead, you'll be absorbed in yourself, whether you're a liberal, or a conservative or a member of the fickle crowd.

But that's also the problem, isn't it? Because if you really listen to what God wants of you, to his law and his prophets, as Jeremiah says here; if you really listen what it means to live in line with God's ways, in the grain of creation, that you love him with *all* your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself; that you act justly and love mercy, and rather than being proud you walk humbly, and not just occasionally, when you're having a good day, but everyday, you realise, you *can't* do it. To be perfect like he is perfect is simply out of your reach, however hard you try.

And you begin to realise, it's not a list of does and don'ts I need, it's a saviour. Someone who can save me from judgment and do something so radical in my life that when I hear what God wants of me, I both want it, and am able to obey it.

**How not to do it.** How not to just go through the motions.

Now, the irony of what goes on here in chapter 26 is that while the priests and the crowd put Jeremiah on trial, in reality it's them who are on trial. And if they don't repent God will come in judgment. And yet, it's clear he doesn't want to. Verse 3: "It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them." As God says through the prophet Ezekiel, he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

But how can you reconcile a God who doesn't want to destroy the wicked, with a God of who does destroy the wicked? How can you reconcile a God of love, with a God of justice? And the answer is, you don't reconcile them in an argument, but in a person. In the One who Jeremiah's trial points us to. The One who never just went through the motions.

You see, if the temple housed God's presence, the apostle John watched Jesus' life up close, and said of him, 'And the Word - [the logos, the self-expression of God, the one who holds the whole grain of creation together] - became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' (John 1:14). That when they looked upon the beauty of Christ and his character, they had looked upon God. The God of grace and truth. The God of love and of justice.

And here, the crowd wants to put Jeremiah to death, until they change their minds. But with Jesus it worked the other way. Just days before he was put on trial, the crowd had surged around him as he entered Jerusalem, and the temple, crying out 'Hosanna! Salvation! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!' But at his trial, just as at Jeremiah's, they change sides. Except now they side against Jesus and cry out 'crucify him!'

And here Jeremiah warns the officials that if they execute him they will have innocent blood on their hands. And what does Pontius Pilate, the official trying Jesus case do, when Jesus, the truly innocent man, is brought before him? Does he, like these men in Jeremiah's day, declare him not guilty? He wants to, he even tries to, but ultimately he refuses to, and instead he takes a bowl of water and washes his hands in public saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood." And the crowd calls out, "his blood be on us and on our children" and Pilate hands him over to be crucified. Full of grace and truth. Crucified on the same hilltop the temple was built on.

But do you see?, at the cross, Jesus was being judged in our place. The destruction that God threatens against all those who break his law - whether you're a liberal, or a conservative, or one of the fickle, fell upon Christ, so that you can be saved. And it was his life that disintegrated, that you might be made whole. He was the dwelling place of God, the ultimate temple, and he was destroyed that you might be built up. And he knew endless fellowship with the Father, but was cast out of his presence, that you might be welcomed in and know God's endless love for those who don't deserve it.

You see, Jeremiah escaped death. Jesus embraced it. Jeremiah said to the officials, 'my life is in your hands' and they set him free. Jesus said to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane - 'my life is in your hands' and he wasn't set free. Because he wants you to be free - free from all your attempts

to justify yourself or earn your approval. And he was declared guilty that you might be declared innocent. He died that you might live - live in the grain of all he has for you.

And that's how you can both worship him and obey him. Because when you see his love for you it melts your heart. And you can begin to give up those things you don't want to give up because you know he wants the best for you. And you can start doing those things you don't want to do, because you know he's transforming you into his likeness, and there's no one as beautiful as him. And when trouble comes, you know it's not God judging you, because Christ was judged for you, so you can trust him that he's got something good to teach you through this. And you won't flip-flop, one day thinking God loves you, another thinking he hates you. You'll look to Christ and know he loves you, not because you're so good, but because he is.

And you'll love him, and go out into the world to be a blessing and a light, not a curse.