

## Let's Not Fight Anymore

One of the most painful things you can experience is having a child wander. Maybe they reject the faith or they might completely reject the family or he becomes an addict.

People are willing to offer plenty of advice, "You just need 'tough love,'" "If they don't show you respect, don't show them respect." "Raise up a child in the way he should go and when he gets old, he will return to it." Some of those things might be technically true or helpful, but they don't get to the heart of the issue for the parent.

The issue is the emotional investment. The parent is the one who was there when that child took his first breath and his first steps, when she first learned to ride her bike or got her driver's license. Parents are the ones who stay up at night worrying; and wrestling discipline. It's easy to know what to do when you haven't invested so much time, money, energy and sheer emotion.

Parents want the best for their children. Even though we might not always *know* the right thing—whatever that is—whatever the cost, we would do it in a heartbeat not to see our kids struggle. If you have grown children, you might recognize yourself in some of this. It brings back memories and feelings and maybe even some regret.

This is how I want you to think as we read the passage today. The goal is not just to communicate *information*, but *emotion*. You see, sometimes when we read Scripture

strictly for information, it can be academic and impersonal and we don't really "get it." That's because sometimes in order to understand, you can't just read the words, you have to *feel* them. If you can't *feel* them, you don't *understand* them.

I want you to turn to Matthew 23 one more time as we conclude our series called "Versus." We called it that because we're witnessing what is essentially a one-sided fight between Jesus and the Pharisees. And in it we've talked about hypocrisy and self-righteousness. We learned that faithfulness to God isn't just religious practice, but it's mercy, justice and faithfulness. And we learned that appearing good is costlier than being good. Jesus brings all this up while laying into the Pharisees.

So, after hearing Jesus' diatribe, what emotion was Jesus feeling? Most of us would say Jesus was *angry*. And that seems to be right. But there's an emotion that runs much deeper for Jesus that comes out in this passage today. That emotion is love. You seldom get anger without love because, as the great Jewish writer Elie Wiesel wrote, "*the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.*" Love generates strong feelings and Jesus obviously has strong feelings here. So, let's read. [Vs 37-39].

Now, if you've been following along the past few weeks, you might notice that this last section is very different than the rest in a couple of ways. First, you'll see that Jesus' *tone* changes. Throughout most of the chapter, Jesus is obviously angry. But then when we come to this section, his tone shifts from anger, to *longing*.

In verse 37, Jesus paints a word-picture of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them from the elements. It's a tender image that communicates his care and compassion for his people. The tone is very different.

But, second, you might notice a change in *perspective*. Here's what I mean. Up to this point, it's Jesus versus the Pharisees. But in *this* section, it's like he zooms out and gives us a birds-eye view. We see the perspective shift in three ways.

First, the *audience* changes. Notice, in verse 37 he's no longer talking just to the Pharisees, but "Jerusalem." Why is that? Well, Jerusalem is the capital city of Israel and the holy city of Judaism. It was the place where the king lived—when Israel had a king—and it was the center of Jewish worship. So, now rather than just the Pharisees, Jesus shifts his attention to all of Israel.

Second, the *speaker* changes. It's interesting that in this lament, Jesus says to Jerusalem, **"How I've longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings..."** This isn't the kind of thing an ordinary guy says. You don't even hear it from human leaders. You know where you do see this? Places like Psalm 57:1 where David says to God, **"I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings..."** or Psalm 91:4, which says God will **"cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge..."** or Isaiah 49:5 that says that **God "will gather Israel to himself."** Jesus is no longer speaking as a rabbi chewing out a group of religious leaders, he's speaking as God himself.

Third, the timeline changes. In verse 37, he says, **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together...”** What’s strange about this is that Jesus’ ministry was only about three years, but he’s talking like he’s tried for a very long time to bring Israel around. Jerusalem hadn’t killed a prophet in centuries. Jesus is doing something much more significant than chewing out a few bad leaders. What’s happening here is part of a much bigger story. So, what’s that story?

Well, a few weeks ago, we said that people often believe Jesus’ teachings were revolutionary—that everything was new and that the people of Israel had never heard it before. But when we look closer, we find that Jesus taught very little that wasn’t already taught in the Old Testament. More often than not, when he teaches people how to live, he’s simply calling the people back to what God had been saying for thousands of years.

Now, this might be a surprise to some people, but it shouldn’t be because we know that Jesus is the *fulfillment* of the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews says it this way, **“In the past [OT] God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...”** What I want you see in Matthew 23 is that Jesus isn’t just angry because of what he’d seen from the religious leaders over the last couple of years. He’s angry because they’re continuing a pattern of disobedience that has spanned thousands of years.

If Jesus didn't *care* about Israel, he wouldn't be bothered by their self-destructive behavior. But it's obvious that he does. And just like a parent whose heart breaks over their wayward child, Jesus expresses God's love for his children.

Picture for a minute, the image Jesus uses of the hen gathering her chicks under her wing. The chicks going every which way, hopping around, pecking at the ground, chasing the most interesting thing that happens to come into sight. That's a great description of Israel throughout the Old Testament. In fact, when Jesus says, he's longed to gather Israel's children, but they were not willing, he was thinking through the history of the people of Israel. God wanted to gather Israel, but Israel continually wandered. Let's look at some of the ways they wandered.

First, they wandered by *worshipped the idols of their day*. Israel was hopelessly influenced by the people around them, and it's easy to see why. In order to be faithful to God, Israel would have to stand out from the nations around them in some very significant ways.

For one, they were the only religion in the world that believed in only *one* God. The other religions believed in a pantheon of gods or tribal gods that warred against each other, so they were always praying to their gods for protection from other gods. And it would have been tempting to doubt or to pray to one of the tribal gods for protection—just in case. It couldn't hurt, could it?

Also, pagan religion was all about the ritual. The gods had no ethical expectations. Make the right sacrifices and do the proper rituals and live how you want. In fact, immorality like ritual prostitution, orgies and even human sacrifice were part of their worship. But for the God of the Bible, it was never about the ritual. Over and over what God says he really wanted from his people was to **“act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.”**

It was incredibly hard for them not to stray when they were all alone among the other religions. Many of you know how hard it is not to fall into the same patterns as the people around you. God knew it would be hard. That’s why God commanded Israel to separate themselves from the other nations. But they couldn’t resist the temptation to chase the idols of their day.

Second, they wandered by *focusing on political power and rejected God as their King*. This is a storyline in the Old Testament that many people know, but don’t realize just how significant it is in the story of Scripture. The story is in 1 Samuel 8. From the beginning, Israel had been ruled directly by God with prophets and judges as God’s mouthpiece to the people. But in 1 Samuel 8, as the prophet Samuel was getting older, the people of Israel asked Samuel to give them a king like the other nations.

Samuel thought they rejected him, but here’s God’s response, **“Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected**

**me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.” (vs. 7-8)**

Then God warned the people. Once you get a king you'll pay the price. He'll take your daughters for his harem, and your sons for his army. He'll take your land and lead you into war. But the people still wanted a king—look at what they said, **“No!” they said. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” (vs. 19-20)** From that moment, with a few momentary exceptions, the focus of the kings was on power, prestige, and autonomy—not to be the people God chose to bless the nations. God wanted to gather them. He wanted to be their king, but they were not willing.

The third way they wandered is that they *loved religion more than they loved God or neighbors*. This was Jesus' strongest criticism of the Pharisees, but the roots go all the way back to the people of Israel.

Another significant, but forgotten storyline from the Old Testament happens in 2 Samuel 7. Things were going well for King David and Israel, so David had some time to think. He looked around at how nice his palace was and then thought about the fact that Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized God's presence was still in a tent. He thought, *“That's a travesty. God deserves so much more. I'm going to build him a Temple.”*

We think, that's a nice gesture, but look at God's response, **"<sup>6</sup>I have never lived in a house, from the day I brought the Israelites out of Egypt until this very day. I have always moved from one place to another with a tent and a Tabernacle as my dwelling. <sup>7</sup>Yet no matter where I have gone with the Israelites, I have never once complained to Israel's tribal leaders, the shepherds of my people Israel. I have never asked them, "Why haven't you built me a beautiful cedar house?""**

In other words, "I've never had one and I don't want one." But God appreciated David's heart so he agreed to let his son Solomon build one. But once it was built, the Temple rather than God himself became the center of their worship.

This is why later, when Israel was threatened by Babylon, some prophets were saying, "God will never let us be taken because we have the Temple here. God will certainly protect his house." But God said told them through the prophet Jeremiah, **"Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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!" <sup>5</sup>If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup>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,  
then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.”**

Some people, including the Israelites viewed religious practice as something like a swear jar. You know what I'm talking about, right? If someone, or if a family feels guilty because they swear too much, (or some families do it with insults), they have a jar in the house and if they swear, they have to put a dollar in the jar.

Now, the point of the jar is to making swearing costly and to hopefully, get the family members to speak better. But I've known guys who just stick a 20 in the jar at the beginning of the week so they can say what they want. That misses the point completely. But there are also people who use religion this way, too.

But God never intended religion to be this way. And you can see this just a chapter back from our passage today in Matthew 22. The Pharisees asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the law. His answer was this, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”** Jesus knew that if he stopped with the first commandment, the Pharisees in their self-satisfied way, would believe their religious ritual proved they loved God. But they didn't love God's creation. Again, this wasn't new teaching from Jesus. God had been telling them this all along. But they

missed it. Israel, almost from the beginning through the time of Jesus wandered. And Jesus laments his wayward children.

Remember earlier, I said that Jesus didn't teach anything that hadn't been taught in the Old Testament? Well, that's not entirely true. But you have to understand that Jesus wasn't *against* the Old Testament, he *fulfilled* it. The Old Testament shows how God worked to gather his people and Jesus was the culmination of that plan.

But watch how it happens. Matthew 23:38, Jesus says, **“Look, your house is left to you desolate.”** I know that sounds cryptic, but the *house* Jesus is referring to is the Temple. And he means that it's about to be destroyed. Essentially, Jesus is warning them of the coming judgment of Israel, just like you see in the Old Testament. But understand that God never directly punished Israel, he simply removed his protection and allowed the natural consequences of their choices. The last judgment on Israel was when Babylon came and took them into captivity and seemingly ended Israel's kings.

And now, if you continue to read through chapter 24 notice the conversation that follows this is a conversation about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple at the hands of the Romans.

Now, Jesus doesn't get any great satisfaction from this. If your image of God's judgment is God raining down fire with a sinister laugh, “I told you I'd get you!” Then you have the wrong impression. Remember this is a father longing for his wayward child to

return, but he knows the only way it might possibly happen is for him to feel the consequences of his action. But here's the incredible thing: Despite the fact that this is a painful process, the beauty is that God redeems it not just to bring about the redemption of the Jews, but to redeem the whole world. How did he do it?

God wanted to be Israel's God, but Israel rejected him and worshipped idols. So, God forgave our idol worship and became human in the person of Jesus to be the perfect image of God on earth.

God wanted to be Israel's king, but Israel rejected him and chose other kings. But the kings they chose only led them in to exile. Even in their exile, Jesus came as the Messiah, or Christ, which means "anointed King." But it wouldn't be long before they rejected Jesus as well. In fact, as he hung upon the cross, there was a sign hanging over his head and do you remember what it said? "This is Jesus, King of the Jews."

But after three days in the grave, he rose again and that resurrection was the proof or vindication that through Jesus, God has come down now rules his people directly. But he wasn't just the king of Israel, he became the king of humanity.

The Apostle Paul says this in Philippians 2. Because of Jesus' death and Resurrection, **"<sup>9</sup>God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and**

on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

And God didn't want religion as a mediator between him and his people. But we rejected direct relationship, so God set up religion. But, what Jesus predicted in Matthew 23 and 24 about the destruction of the Temple came true in AD 70 when the Roman General Titus came and destroyed the city and the Temple and put an end to Temple worship. Because the new king Jesus ushered in a way of life that had no more need for a Temple. It has no more need for sacrifice because God, through Jesus forgives his people.

What that did was give us direct access to God. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 says, <sup>16</sup>**“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? <sup>17</sup>If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.”** The Church has become the Temple—not the building but Jesus says that **“where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am with them.” (Mt 18:20)**

What I want you to see is that Jesus didn't just lament people's wandering, he set out to change it. Jesus gathers his people under his wing by forgiving our wandering and by removing the barriers of kings and temples and he deals with his church directly and he is calling us back to what he's always called us to—not to religious duty and ritual, but to **“act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.”**

Church, this is something we have to get right. The problem is that even though we know this message, we're still tempted to walk the path of Israel and the Pharisees. We're tempted to wander. We're tempted to chase the idols of our day—money, sex, popularity, comfort. We're tempted to lust for political power—and many Christians today who put more stake in politics than they do in getting their walk right. We're tempted to love the religious practices more than we love God or our neighbors. And I sometimes I look at the Church and I wonder if Jesus still says to the church, *"I've wanted to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."*

The question is, "Are we willing now?" Will we continue the same sins of the past, or can we accept God, through Jesus as our God and King and the Church as his Temple?