

## A Center of Righteousness and Justice

Jeremiah 7:1-11; Matthew 7:15-29

Today, let's consider church as the place where we learn and live God's righteousness and justice. Sometimes church has the trappings of religion but not the spirit of Jesus. It has the right words but not the actions and attitudes. Church should be the place we learn how the Almighty sees the world and everyone in it.

We all have 4 weaknesses that Satan seeks to exploit. **The first is** that we want to be liked and accepted by others. Nobody likes to get the cold shoulder treatment, or fear that others are saying terrible things behind our backs or even to our face. We don't want to offend those whom we may need to turn to for help. We may say, "I don't care what anybody says or thinks about me," but that's not true. Even if you reach out your hand to a toddler and the child pulls back their hand and says "no," it has an affect upon us. We may try to hide it, we feel that rejection.

The **second** weakness is, we want to go along to get along. Most work places and social groups simply don't like people who ask difficult questions. Or challenge the status quo. We don't study issues from an angle that might make us embarrassed or have to face reality. All cultures pressure people, usually subtly to get with the program, stay in denial and keep everyone comfortable. Don't reveal secrets. Don't mention problems. Don't upset anyone, for any reason, at any time. This is partly why racism and injustice has had such long term legs in the church and in societies around the world. Whoever points this stuff out, isn't appreciated.

The **third** weakness is that once we reach a certain material comfort level, we do not want to go below it again. We actually begin to tell ourselves we deserve this, we worked hard. So we guard it closely along with the systems that favor us and our families. This helps close our hearts to the cost of pain it causes others. Why do you think every country anywhere any time has always had a group that felt threatened by immigrants? Or want certain people to keep their place, usually Aborigines & immigrants?

Don't you think church people everywhere, any place and any time, knew and know that most forms of indentured servants, a class system, and slavery is wrong? Don't you think people know that the sex trade is evil? Don't people know that child labor was and is wrong? Don't we know that dangerous working conditions for people around the world is wrong – simply so we can purchase things cheaply? Don't we accept that taking another country's wealth is a form of theft? Don't we want to recognize that there are many ways of exploiting people? Why don't we recognize that the profit motive taken to extremes impoverishes people?

And the **fourth** weakness is we have a quick tendency to judge, blame and label people. This makes us better than them. This closes us off to multiple facts around situations. We quickly take sides. This helps us keep difficult dynamics simple and often dismisses history. But love is not like that. Our Creator is not like that. We don't have time to look at John 8:1-11, but please take a look at it. In almost every Bible study I've been in, the leader puts all the focus or the main focus on the men or the woman. And they downplay Jesus' even handedness.

An example today is: Can we equally blame the tribal chief who was tackled a while ago, who broke the law, was disrespectful, inappropriate and not setting a good example, along with the RCMP officer who tackled him? Both the chief & officer escalated a situation beyond what it needed to be. Both are bad examples. And we must not forget the history of the Indigenous people, and the government.

**One of the challenges life offers is to hold several truths & / or facts in balance or tension.** There may even be opposite realities. But we have the tendency to assign more fault or blame automatically to one party, which keeps us from seeing the broader picture. Why? We like to simplify things down to a scapegoat so we are comfortable. But what does God see and value?

Sometimes we go too far in one direction, like this Amish Bishop. One day two members of his congregation argued and so the next morning one of them drove his buggy down the Bishop's

lane. The man explained his side of the argument and the Bishop ended up saying, “Yes, yes, you are right.” The man was happy.

A little while later the other man came to the Bishop’s house to explain why he was justified. After hearing his explanation, the Bishop said, “Yes, yes, you are right.” This man also went away satisfied.

As soon as the second man left, the Bishop’s wife, who had been eavesdropping on both visitors, exclaimed, “Papi, both men can’t be right!” To which the Bishop responded, “Yes, yes, you are right.”

That’s one way of responding to tough situations. The Bishop was a great listener but not helpful in leading to reconciliation or truth. But God’s way is different. He does hold up two opposite truths while we tend to take sides. We often blame one side because of the four weaknesses I mentioned earlier. And it’s easy to blame the RCMP officer or the Indigenous Chief – and not both. Instead, our Savior sees the whole picture and sometimes his message is pretty grim. At times God’s church is so off base that threatening words are uttered. This is when we can’t argue one side over the other. But that’s what Jeremiah did. He just ignored the four weaknesses and shared God’s view.

Jeremiah 7 famous sermon is directed at Judah, but we can also say it’s directed at the church today. So in our series on the church we need to learn from this sermon. The background of this sermon is the people had been rescued from slavery. Given a land. A code of laws. And a way of worship. But when this sermon was delivered, the people were not pleasing to God. This is both for individuals and the nation. So the Lord said the Jeremiah, “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message. Tell all the people of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Eternal to stop and listen to the word of the Eternal. Tell them this is what I, the God of Israel, have to say: “Change your ways. Stop what you are doing. Do not rely on the misguided words, ‘The temple of the Eternal, the temple of the Eternal, the temple of the Eternal,’ (notice the thrice)

repetition) as if the Temple’s presence alone will protect you. (Notice the “if, then” phrasing. But if you genuinely change your ways and stop what you are doing;  
if you deal with each other fairly;  
if you stop oppressing foreigners, orphans, and widows;  
if you stop shedding the blood of the innocent in this land;  
and if you stop practicing the self-destructive worship of other gods;  
then I will let you live forever in this land I promised your ancestors long ago.

This really goes opposite of the 4 weaknesses Satan wants to cripple us with and exploit. It’s talking about righteousness and justice. It’s direct, clear, and to the point. Stop doing these things and you will be blessed. Stop your false religion! **To summarize**, God said I have 4 things against you. 1) You are not dealing honestly with others. Any of you ever been bitten by not reading the fine print? Or been quoted a price in US dollars, when you thought you were working with a Canadian dollar quote?

2) You are oppressing those who have no position of power; the foreigners, immigrants, the orphans, widows, aboriginals, sex slaves, people of dark color, migrant workers, women and so on. Does that happen today in Canada, taking advantage of poor immigrants working in factories, on farms under terrible conditions, or forcing people into sex and work slavery? What about the underpaid working poor? Working without making enough to live – is oppression. Especially when people up the supply chain make multiples more and get generous government help of various kinds.

3) You are shedding innocent blood. This goes in all kinds of directions. Police killing unarmed people. Wars for all kinds of reasons including prestige and power and wealth. Racist actions that result in death. Abortions in most cases is innocent blood. Economic systems where people have no shelter or food.

4) And you are worshipping other gods. This includes bowing down to wealth over people’s well being and even the law. We see this

tension with the virus between the need for a viable economy – one truth, and the need for people to be safe, healthy, and able to live. It includes believing your race, religion, skin color, tribe, sex and so on is better than any other group. Do Black Lives really matter? Or Aboriginals? Or Muslims? Gay people?

Notice, this sermon by Jeremiah was given at the Temple gates. Why? The problem was how the worshippers treated people in their daily lives outside the temple gates. The Almighty was concerned about what they were doing before and after they came to the temple. That's why Yahweh offered hope and grace and said, "If you will change what you do outside the temple, then God will continue to meet with you in the temple." Otherwise your worship is useless.

What was the problem? The problem was not their worship. The problem was how they treated each other the rest of the time. The problem was their ways and attitudes and actions of living. The problem was what they had been doing before they came to the temple, and what they would do after they left. So God was calling them out, to change and then their worship would be honored and accepted. We hear an echo of the Cain and Abel story here. This wasn't just a call for individuals to change. It was a call for politics, economics, leadership and the whole society to change. Like when God called Jonah to tell Nineveh to repent.

So we have these four accusations of not living rightly and justly. But even more than that, Jeremiah tells them to not trust in deceptive words. He says it twice. What does he mean by this? God says you are doing this evil stuff, and think you are safe.

Verse 9. "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, & say, "We are safe"— safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! thunders the Lord." They were breaking five or six of the ten commandments.

God through Jeremiah is saying to them and to us, "You are not safe." Just because of your history of God blessing you in various ways, that isn't going to continue. Just because you have this wonderful temple facility, that will not protect you. So don't feel safe. The people had forgotten to obey God fully. In every way the Almighty expects. That's hard to take. That is not being nice to simply get along. That's cutting through the deceptions that build up in our lives. Of partially following God. Proper worship in a church isn't enough. God wants justice and righteousness done and lived by all people and especially followers of Jesus.

The Jews in Jeremiah's day had forgotten about all God's teachings. Moses had warned them, "If you walk away from God's requirements, if you ignore everything of what God asks of you, you are in big trouble & will be punished." They were warned several times. By Jeremiah's time, they had forgotten and were taken in by Satan and their own desires. They had the temple; and they had King David's family line; they chose to believe they were faithful in the Creator's eyes; so they were safe. But not really.

The sermon's message: we can't be safe even with our heritage and God's blessings in the past, when we do these detestable things. Verse 11 hammers the message home again. "Has this house (meaning house of worship and also the people group), which bears my Name, become your robbers' den? But I have been watching! thunders the Lord." You are breaking the covenant between you and me.

It's like God's house has become a hide out for unrighteous robbers. Keep in mind Jesus clearing out the Temple courtyard is a NT version of telling us the same message. (Mt. 21:12-13)

What is sad is, many people are acting the same today. We think we are safe because we've made a decision to follow God, we've put our trust in Christ, we worship with God's people, we live fairly honorable faithful lives and we have a place of worship. But what about our life out there, our ways, actions, thoughts and

society's priorities? The NT never says any one is "safe" who is not living in God's ways.

This can't be dismissed as just an Old Testament warning. The Apostle Paul frequently contrasts lists of works of the flesh with the fruits of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5 we are given a great summary of what our Creator detests and what he wants. (13-25)

The book of James says, faith without actions is worthless. Don't be double minded. Faith that does not change our thinking and actions and ways is dead. This is not just for individuals but it's also for a country and the world.

Anabaptists have traditionally said that the Bible within the Bible is the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7. It's the summary of what the Almighty expects of us – which has to do with how we live. This is so important and difficult to live that Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer – right in the middle of this sermon. He knows it's hard to live as our Creator expects. That prayer is a set of goals for us to live by, with the summary – Let God's Kingdom come.

And close to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we hear this warning about True and False Disciples. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

And the Sermon on the Mount ends with the parable of the wise and foolish builders. The lesson of the parable: People who hear Jesus' words and do them are wise, they will be safe in judgement. People who hear his words but don't do them are fools, and will be wiped out in the judgement. Jeremiah told the people of Judah and us today, to not build our spiritual lives on sand but instead on not rock. (Matthew 7:24-27)

One of the blessings of the coronavirus is that we can see more clearly than ever, God's way of

living or Satan's way. Maybe that's the reason we have this disease. It's a warning from God: World - straighten up. Church – start doing the things that please God. Stop letting those four habits of Satan lead you. Be righteous and just.

It's harder and harder to cover up and deny that we aren't like the people of Judah. And along with all the chaos of the virus – we see economic injustice and a lack of righteousness - like Black Lives Matter – which has focused the attention of the world. We face the question - Will we live righteously and justly? Will we with the prophet Amos declare and live and work - "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (5:24)

Or will we continue living out the accusations Jeremiah made? Basically this sermon is a call for repentance by individuals and nations and the world. Do we dare say that's what Covid-19 is revealing – among other things:

the tension between money & people's health;  
enormous inequities of rich and poor;  
essential people are also the disposable people;  
economic systems that favor the white nations;  
lack of essential health care systems in nations;  
the corruption and mismanagement of governments all over the world – like Lebanon;  
plus the renewed alert to racism among Christians and societies toward others in our country and around the world;  
will we hear these evidences as a call to repent, change, and return to living as scripture, Jeremiah, and Jesus calls us to?

Will congregations be full of people so their temples of worship are centers of righteousness and justice? Especially outside the building.

Will we pay the price of righteousness and justice? Will we fight the four weaknesses that Satan seeks to exploit? Will churches make righteousness and justice one of their purposes of being? Pre Christians and the world are watching God's church more than ever before. Will we do better this time around in history?