

When Men Say “No” to God.

Text: Mat 23:34-39

Suggested Hymns:

70, 173, 225, 128, 544T165

- 1) God’s gracious offer
- 2) Man’s stubborn refusal
- 3) The punishment for such rejection
- 4) Grace for the penitent

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 23:34-39, ³⁴ *“Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city,* ³⁵ *“that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* ³⁶ *“Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*

³⁷ *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!* ³⁸ *“See! Your house is left to you desolate;* ³⁹ *“for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What is the greatest sin? Is it murder, the taking of human life? Is it the worship of idols, and false gods? Is it blasphemy against the holy name of God? Is it the violation of the code of moral decency? True, all these are sins of crimson dye, sins that call down the vengeance of God. And yet none of these crimes, repulsive as they are, qualifies as the greatest sin. Black as they are, they can all be forgiven. God has promised it. The examples in Holy Scripture prove it.

There is one offence, however, that makes all other sins pale into comparative insignificance, an offence which, if continued, removes a person from the realm of divine favour. That is the sin of wilful, stubborn rejection of

the grace of God. And that sin calls down the full measure of God's eternal and terrible wrath, a wrath that will bring everlasting doom.

Our text portrays to us both the nature of this greatest sin and the dread punishment to follow. Let us consider the subject, *When Men Say "No" to God*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. God's Gracious Offer

An essential factor for us to bear in mind when studying God's Word and when applying it both to ourselves and to our fellow men is that God earnestly wants to save all people.

God plays no favourites. He is no respecter of persons. He has not predestined anyone to eternal damnation. His love is so great that He has a fervent desire in His own divine heart to gather all His erring and wayward people to Himself and to bestow upon them the precious gift of life eternal. For indeed Scripture says in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God "*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*"

Now, this all-embracing love of God extended also and especially to the Jews of old, even after they had proved themselves unworthy of His grace by their many acts of ingratitude and of open resistance to His will. And so He tells the Jews to whom He is speaking, *indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes*. From the earliest times God had sent His messengers to His people to preach to them and to instruct them in the way of righteousness.

We note that God's grace is persistent. The preaching of this Word of Life did not always have the proper effect upon the people. It did not always cause them to repent of their sins and turn to their Lord in true faith. Very often they steeled themselves against the influence of the Word. And yet the Lord never gave up trying to melt the stony hearts of His perverse children and to bring them into His fold.

God's grace was not an occasional sentiment on His part, but it was persistent. God kept on sending prophets, wise men and scribes, preachers and teachers to exhort the people to repent.

God indicates the earnestness of His pleading with His people and the intense desire of His heart for their conversion by using a beautiful word picture, *How*

often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. There is hardly any creature so careful of its young as the hen. She calls in a sorrowful voice when they wander away. She searches and scratches and calls to her chicks. She fights for them and warns them with a cry against the hawk. She spreads out her wings to give shelter and protection to her young.

What more appropriate picture of Christ's care for us! He provides us with spiritual food in the Holy Scriptures. He calls to us with a pleading voice whenever we go astray. He cries out in warning whenever spiritual dangers loom over us, like the hawk over the chick, and He spreads out the wings of His grace, mercy and righteousness, and gives us a haven of refuge and strength. Those wings are wide enough to embrace the entire sinner world.

But there is also a note of deep sadness in Jesus' cry, *How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.* For the children of Jerusalem, the Jewish nation, had despised and spurned the call of God to salvation. Therefore Jesus utters the awful reproach, "***O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!*** For indeed, Jerusalem had proved herself guilty of the ultimate crime of killing the very ambassadors of God Himself.

The history of the Old Testament, from Abel to Zechariah, is filled with the slaughter of the men of God, holy and virtuous men who preached the Word of God without fear or favour and who stood up for their religious principles even though it meant death for them.

And the prediction of Jesus in our text indeed came true, for the Jews continued their bitter and bloody persecution of the servants of God. But two short days after our Lord had spoken these words of bitter condemnation He Himself was delivered up to be crucified by these same enemies.

And many of His followers shared a similar fate, for, before many years had elapsed, the enemies of the Cross had beheaded James, they had stoned Stephen, they had scourged Paul time and again, and they carried on their ruthless persecution of the Christians with a hatred and bitterness inspired in hell.

Today Christianity is not persecuted and oppressed with the same violence and bloodshed as was the case 2,000 years ago. Of course, there are some

countries even today, which have virtually outlawed Christianity and have shed the blood of those who remain true to their Lord. But in general the fact remains that Christianity is tolerated in our modern world and that, as a rule, a man can openly profess his Christian faith without fear of persecution.

Yet, even though the opposition of the modern world to the preaching of the Cross does not take on such a violent form as years ago, opposition is there nevertheless. Australia does not outlaw the preaching of the Gospel, but it turns a cold shoulder to it. The message of Christianity is met with coldness, indifference, and contempt. The fearless preaching of sin and grace does not please our modern generation. It cuts their conscience to the core, and so they brand the Gospel message as “old-fashioned,” “intolerant,” and “narrow-minded,” utterly unfit for our 21st century. So they replace it with a flabby social gospel, which stands for nothing at all and so hurts nobody’s feelings.

And as far as the preachers of Christ are concerned, modern Australians do not actually take up stones to throw at them, or scourge them with rods, or nail them to a cross, but they treat them with a contemptuous indifference, and they repel with scorn their call to repentance and faith.

They are unmindful of the fact that the holy ministry is the office entitled to the greatest respect, for it is the one office ordained by Almighty God. They forget, too, that the holy ministry is not only the most sacred, but also the most useful of all professions, for it is the greatest safe-guard of our nation against the forces of moral corruptness and lawlessness, the greatest champion both of spiritual and civic righteousness, honesty, law and order. It is well also for Christian people to bear that in mind.

But modern Australia, like Jerusalem of old, scorns the prophets of God and rejects their saving message, and so it falls under the condemnation of the Almighty, “O Australia, Australia, *How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*”

What is the reason for this attitude? Why do so many people spurn the offer of salvation? Can it be that God does not desire their conversion or that He hardens their heart? Certainly not! Such an idea does violence to the idea of God’s all-embracing mercy and goodness and is completely at variance with Holy

Scripture. What, then, is the reason? Our text indicates that when it says, “*O Jerusalem ... but you were not willing!*”

2. Man’s Stubborn Refusal

You were not willing! That is the reason why so many are lost — they will not believe the Gospel message. If men are saved, they owe their salvation to the grace of God; but if they are lost, it is altogether their own fault, for “*God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*”¹ The words of St. John ring true to this very day, that although “*the light has come into the world,*” men love darkness rather than light.²

No wonder there is a plaintive note, a note of deepest sorrow, in Jesus’ cry, *but you were not willing!* Jesus offers to people every opportunity to be saved, but they will not. He offers them a place in the eternal mansions, without money and without price, but they will not. He holds out His gracious hand to rescue them from the quicksand of despair into which they are fast sinking, but they will not.

Why is it that so many people in our land are unchurched, while the Gospel message is being proclaimed from coast to coast, within easy reach of practically everyone? Why is it that people will pass by a Christian church day after day and never stop to think what that church ought to mean to their lives and never pass through those church doors which stand wide open to welcome them?

Why is it that people can hear the church bells ring on Sunday morning but fail to accept their invitation to come and worship God who has given them life and breath and every good and perfect gift and, above all, has sent His Son to redeem them?

Why is it that people will worry and fret and strive and slave for this world’s goods, which will last a few years at the most and then be forever gone, while they neglect their souls, which will live on forever?

Why is it that people are so blind and so short-sighted as to think so much of this world and so little of eternity?

The answer to these questions is that it is their own sinful, stubborn, perverse nature, and so, when our Lord looks down upon His hard-hearted, stiff-necked

children, He cries out in anguish, *“O Jerusalem ... but you were not willing!* It is stubborn, wilful, continued unbelief — and there is no greater crime.

3. The Punishment For Such Rejection

Indeed, the punishment upon such wilful rejection of God’s grace is terrible even to contemplate. Our Lord had just pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees His sevenfold *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites”* — the bitterest, most scathing, most scorching words that ever fell from His otherwise gentle lips.

And now, to punish them for their hatred toward Him and for their stubborn refusal to accept His grace, Jesus speaks the awful sentence of doom upon them. Our text says, *“that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”*³⁶ *“Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*

Because they continued in the sins of their fathers, persecuting and killing the men of God, and because they intensified that sinfulness by killing even the greatest Prophet, Jesus Christ Himself, our Lord tells them that they shall also have to bear the guilt of their fathers.

They shall have to bear the brunt of the punishment of the accumulated sins of past generations, which have now come down on them in an avalanche of guilt. Indeed, as we read in Exodus 20:5, *For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.*

This means that God’s spurned love becomes consuming anger. Our Lord is gentle and loving in the invitation to partake of His grace and salvation. But He is consumed with holy anger when that offer is spurned by His ungrateful people.

In His offer of grace He is like the warming rays of the sun, seeking out every nook and corner to give light and warmth and start things growing. But those kindly rays of the sun, when they are caught and gathered together in a glass and focused on a heap of dry thorns, set fire to it and consume it. And so also our Saviour’s bright and glowing love will finally focus on the wicked and the impenitent and consume them to the uttermost.

In this way Jesus sweeps down on the scribes and Pharisees like a flash of lightning, withering, scorching, burning, consuming — and says to them, “*Woe — sevenfold woe — unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*” And that same awful sentence of condemnation He speaks to those people who today persist in their unbelief and refuse to believe His Word.

To all these people Jesus says in our text, *See! Your house is left to you desolate.* We all have a horror of a haunted house. That is a house in which the inhabitants have died or which they have forsaken, leaving it empty and desolate. The house then goes to rack and ruin. Weeds and thorn bushes grow up in the yard. The fences are broken down. The plaster falls from the ceiling. The doors squeak on their hinges, and the wind howls through the broken shutters with, an eerie sound.

Gradually a legend arises to the effect that the house is haunted, that the ghosts of long-dead occupants walk through its halls by night, uttering weird sounds that echo through the countryside. And so no one goes near that dilapidated dwelling any more. The house is haunted.

So also when a man gives himself over to impenitence and sin, then the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit depart from such a person and leave the house inside of him desolate. And with these rightful occupants of that spiritual house gone, it rapidly falls into ruin and decay.

And so there come to inhabit that dilapidated house evil spirits, the ghosts of past sins, of unrepented sins, of persisting sins. And when these evil spirits take possession of that house, the Spirit of God gives the house a wide berth. The house is haunted. Jesus said, *See! Your house is left to you desolate.*”

That is the sure punishment on this greatest of all sins — the sin of unbelief. The house of the Jews was indeed left desolate. In the year 70, only about 40 years after the events of our text, the entire city of Jerusalem was sacked by the invading hordes of Rome, the blood of the Jewish children ran in streams, and in all Jerusalem there was not left one stone upon the other, so complete was that destruction.

It has well been said that Jerusalem fled from the wings of the hen into the talons of the eagle — the eagle of conquering Rome.

The house of the Jews has been left desolate also in a spiritual sense. The Jewish people are a living testimonial to the justice of God and to the unerring truthfulness of His prophecies. A scattered, persecuted people, they bear continual witness to both the mercy and severity of God — His mercy in making the Saviour one of their own race, come to save them first; and His severity, in punishing them for their wilful rejection of His grace in Christ Jesus.

And the punishment that befell the Jews and Jerusalem will befall everyone who spurns the mercy of God, who will not receive His Heaven-sent salvation. A man cannot reject God and succeed. That applies to nations, that applies to church bodies, and that applies to individuals. That is the unforgivable sin.

4. Grace For The Penitent

But to those who repent and turn to God for grace, no matter how black their past crimes may have been, God still extends the arms of His love and compassion. Turning to Him in faith, we repose under the shadow of His wings for time and for eternity.

Then, like those on the first Palm Sunday who received and welcomed Him with a believing heart, we shall hail Him at His coming with the joyful cry, *'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 2 Peter 3:9

² John 3:19