

JEREMIAH CALLS THE PEOPLE TO OBEDIENCE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 7:1–26

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

This command I gave them: “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.” (Jer. 7:23)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Oct. 6	Mark 13:1–13	Endure to the End
T	Oct. 7	Mark 13:14–27	God Will Protect God’s People
W	Oct. 8	1 Sam. 15:20–26	To Obey Is Better than Sacrifice
Th	Oct. 9	John 14:12–17	Keep Christ’s Commandments
F	Oct. 10	John 2:12–22	An Indestructible Temple
Sa	Oct. 11	Ps. 51:15–19	The Sacrifice That Pleases God

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

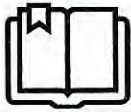
The previous lesson examined the call of Jeremiah. In this lesson, we see one incident within Jeremiah’s ministry: an unpopular sermon at the temple. In this speech, Jeremiah crossed the intangible line between *preaching* and *meddling*. His assessment of the surrounding worshipers was so accurate and his description of them was so honest, it inevitably made them angry.

Basically, Jeremiah condemned the people for continuing to practice idolatry while simultaneously thinking there would be no consequences. The people wrongly assumed that, after Josiah’s reforms, God would maintain the temple and Jerusalem for all time—regardless of anything the people might do. Thus, instead of promoting the outcome setting the people’s hearts and minds right, the promise of God’s forgiveness and ongoing presence led to a “get out of jail free” mentality.

Jeremiah scathingly denounced this popular theology and offered little hope. He added that it was too late even for prayer (7:16). First there had to be an end of complacency—then hope could be possible. Needless to say, the sermon was not enthusiastically applauded (see Jer. 26).

Jeremiah's message remains challenging today. Although we do not live in ancient Judah, we still need to look at our lives and see where we fall short of our covenant responsibilities. We also need to look at the ways in which we hide behind Scripture and our own religious doctrine to avoid facing the harsh realities of who we are and what we do. The good news is that if we come before God in honesty and humility, then indeed we will have reason to feel good about ourselves and our relationship to our God when we join together in worship.

Awesome God, you have great expectations for us. Too often, though, we fail to meet them. When our worship is superficial, our words platitudes, and our offerings tokens, we wrongly assume that you are pleased. Help us recognize that the gift you seek is our wholehearted commitment to fellowship with you. Help us to set our hearts and minds right. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 7:1–11, 21–23

7:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you who enter these gates to worship the LORD. ³Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. ⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."

⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? I, too, am watching, says the LORD. . . .

Note: Find Scripture
Notes for this
reading on the
final page of the
lesson.

²¹Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. ²²For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. ²³But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you."

AN UNPOPULAR MESSAGE

In his sermon, Jeremiah spoke boldly, without regard to the coming consequence to himself. He described the wickedness of the people in great detail. In 7:6 alone, we read of three horrible offenses. The people engaged in acts of oppression against the helpless (represented by the alien, the orphan, and the widow), performed acts of violence (represented by shedding innocent blood), and pursued other gods. Verse 9 expands the list further. The people are accused of stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely, and going after other gods. In other words, the people were ignoring the basic fundamentals of the faith as expressed in the Ten Commandments. They were ignoring both the *specifics* and the *intent* of God's law.

After these blatantly sinful acts, the people dared to come before God in worship as if all was fine. They showed no shame or remorse over their unethical behavior. They had the audacity to expect God's holy place of worship to be a source of sanctuary and safety for them.

Jeremiah called for a markedly different behavior. Quit sinning, he said in essence; follow God's commandments. Indeed, only if the people "truly act justly with one another" (v. 5) would God be with them. "I, too, am watching," says God (v. 11).

Jeremiah reminded the people of the destruction of another major sanctuary also assumed to be safe forever, the shrine at Shiloh (about eighteen miles north of Jerusalem). This former central place of worship was destroyed in response to the people's wickedness back in Samuel's lifetime, around 1050 BCE.

For some, words equating Jerusalem and Shiloh amounted to blasphemy and treason. Shiloh had long stood as an example of the ultimate opposite to Jerusalem. Shiloh was the example of a bad place, which deserved to be destroyed because it was not perfect. Jerusalem, on the other hand, was God's chosen city, the holy home of God, which would stand forever. When Jeremiah

declared that both Jerusalem and the house there would be destroyed as Shiloh had been, he was attacking a national institution and a strong religious belief.

The people did not want to hear that the temple was no longer God's house, much less that their own actions had defiled it. Yet Jeremiah maintained that, because of their unethical behavior, the temple was no longer a sanctuary to God but "a den of robbers" (7:11; compare Matt. 21:13).

 Have you ever been challenged to change your way of thinking and to live your beliefs around your faith? If so, what happened?

AN ANGRY RESPONSE

Jeremiah attacked a popular belief that Jerusalem would always be safe because it contained the temple and because it was the city of David. This perspective was probably enhanced by Sennacherib's failed attack on the city during Hezekiah's reign. People throughout Judah believed that the entire nation would be safe because God had guaranteed the safety of their capital city.

Unfortunately, the people assumed that the security of the temple, Jerusalem, and Judah would continue independent of their actions. They believed that they could behave anyway they chose, ignoring God's commandments and demands, and still benefit from God's protection. They engaged in all manner of unethical behavior, thinking that their safety was guaranteed. Rather than responding to God in gratitude and devotion for the promises they had been given, they took advantage of the situation and gave themselves license to ignore their responsibilities within the covenant relationship.

Jeremiah addressed this situation. He warned the people that they were wrong to trust in God's connection to the temple as their source of ultimate security. The prophet challenged the people to amend their ways, and he warned that failure to do so would result in their destruction.

Needless to say, Jeremiah's message was not well received. Jeremiah 26:8 records that the people were so angry at Jeremiah's sermon that they called for his death. Indeed, prophesying the fall of the temple and the city amounted to treason, for which Jeremiah was arrested (vv. 10–11).

Jeremiah's message to the people strikes at the heart of their predicament. The people honestly did not realize that they were

doing wrong, and that was part of the problem. They would never be able to repent and change as long as they could not recognize their wrongdoing. They thought they could appease God by going to the temple and going through the motions of “right religion.” They thought that mechanically performing sacrifices, making burnt offerings, and offering prayers would be enough for God to think they were doing their duty. They were content to give God the minimum due, believing it was enough to keep God off their backs. They did not understand that God demanded more. God expected obedience, shown through justice to neighbor and worship of God alone. Without this obedience, the rites and rituals of religion meant nothing. In acting out religious ritual not coupled with obedience, the people had managed to turn worship in the temple into an insult to God.



If God were to send a prophet to your community or church today, what might be their message? What do you think the response would be?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

As we read Jeremiah’s text about Judah’s history, it is easy to identify with the prophet. We understand that we are called to confront hypocrisy in others, and we are often happy to engage in that calling. We are quick to judge the rich member of the congregation who does not tithe, the choir singer who recently divorced because of an affair, or the volunteer who ironically does not pay his own staff a livable wage. The difficulty often lies in identifying hypocrisy in ourselves.

If we examine our lives closely, we find that Jeremiah’s accusations may hit closer to home than we like to admit. Most of us go to church on Sunday and feel good about who we are and how we live. But consider the following: How often have you passed up an opportunity to help someone in need? Do you give your time commitments to your church with as much energy and dedication as you do to your hobbies or your work? Do you find that as your life gets busy and something has to give, it is your prayer or worship time that is sacrificed? When you go to make a major purchase in your life, do you ask whether this is what God would have you do with the money? If you read each of the Ten Commandments, can you honestly say that you never break any?

It is helpful to note that Jeremiah did not so much condemn the specific sins of the people as he did their hypocrisy. This is not to say that Jeremiah thought the sins were okay; he did not. Rather, this indicates that when people are unable to recognize their own wrongdoing, there is no chance for salvation, because there is no opportunity for repentance. Jeremiah challenged the people to look beyond the words of safety and promise to the reality of their daily lives.

In this way, he offers us both challenge and hope. We stand in need of God's grace daily. Most of us count on this grace. If we did not, how could we go on? If we could not count on God's forgiveness, how could we stand to face another day, knowing that we are due to fail at being perfect? Jeremiah invites us to own this, promising that when we come before God in honesty and sincerity, God will help us become the people we are called to be.



In what ways does Jeremiah's story reflect experiences within your own faith journey?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The prevailing orthodoxy of Jeremiah's time was based on the "everlasting covenant" God had established with David and David's "house" (2 Sam. 23:5). Judah assumed it was secure in the face of its enemies as long as God's house (temple) stood in Jerusalem and a Davidic descendant sat on the throne. In the minds of most, God wouldn't let Jerusalem or David's dynasty fail (Ps. 46:5).
2. Jeremiah countered the prevailing orthodoxy by reasserting the priority of the Mosaic covenant, a relationship between God and God's people based on promises of loyalty. God pledged to care for the children of Israel; they promised to live according to the commandments (Exod. 20), which included worshiping YHWH alone and practicing solidarity and justice toward others. Without that commitment, the trappings of religions are meaningless.
3. The care of the downtrodden and oppressed of society often appears in the book of Deuteronomy. Jeremiah's preaching echoed the Deuteronomistic reforms of Josiah.