

Desolation Row

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to look back this morning at chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel, great chapter that we read together.

I've entitled this sermon Desolation Row, which is a great Bob Dylan song, by the way, if you know his stuff. But it seemed to be quite an apt title because there is a sense of desolation in this chapter.

But when we come to Scripture, and I'm going to remind you of this because I do it all the time, underpinning every sermon is the fact that we believe the Bible to be God's self-attesting word.

It is God's revelation. It is... The great description of I think in the Bible is that it's God breathed. Okay, it's God breathed through human authors.

And that's hugely important when we come to this or any other part of Scripture that is difficult and we'll make it... Maybe looking this evening at another difficult part of Scripture in Ecclesiastes.

[1 : 05] But it's important because the truth that's revealed in the Bible is the truth on which this universe is founded. And it makes very big claims.

It never claims to be an insignificant book. It never claims to have marginal experiences or truth for us to consider.

It makes big claims. And if you know people who disagree, or if you disagree with God's word, or if you don't believe God's word, then you need to come up with a working alternative to the big issues of life, to the issues of life and death and evil and good and right and wrong.

There needs to be... This book deals with these issues. And it very much speaks into the confusion of life. This time and indeed at any time.

And into your heart and into mine. So whenever we come a passage like this or preach in a passage like this, whatever else happens, and indeed whenever we're preaching or talking to others about God's word, it should never be dull.

[2 : 17] God forbid we preach dull sermons. Or that we share the truth about Jesus in a way that's boring for anyone. Because this is really dynamic truth.

It's explosive truth that we have when we come to God's word. And there's two pictures here in this chapter that Jesus gives us.

Jesus illustrates what He's saying and illustrates who He is in many ways with two pictures. The first one, not in order, but the first one I'm going to say is Jesus is a mother hen.

Okay, we saw that earlier. Longing for the living. Longing for those in front of Him who rejected Him. But He also gives a picture of Himself as an undertaker.

The seven woes are Jesus speaking as an undertaker, as it were. Those were the funeral laments of the day. And He is in these sections, He's not longing for the living, He's mourning for the dead.

[3 : 26] So that's the two pictures that we have that Jesus gives us here. And you need, and people who are listening and reading God's word always need to ask the question, what's it going to be?

What's it going to be for you in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is He longing for you as the one who's living? Or is He mourning over you because you're spiritually dead?

Why do we have these two pictures here at this point in Matthew's Gospel? Why do we see Him responding to the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of His day and indeed the people who will soon reject Him?

Why? Well, because He sees two things. He sees, in the first place, He sees the immediate future. Christ at this point recognizes and sees as He focuses on the people, He sees where their rejection is going to lead very soon in the world in which He was living, physically.

He could see that in a few, maybe 40 years forward from this AD 70, there would be a terrifying destruction of Jerusalem, many, many thousands and thousands of people killed or forced out of Jerusalem forever.

[4 : 53] Jerusalem itself would be sacked and destroyed. And He could see that. He could see physically where the rejection was leading, great weight of centuries of rejection of God.

But He could see more than that because the destruction of Jerusalem in many ways is a foreshadowing of a much more terrible future eternal destruction of which He was feeling the cold shadow as He moved towards the cross.

The cross was coming ever nearer. He was heading towards the cross and all that that meant and He could sense the coldness of the forsakenness that the cross would bring.

The physical separation was one thing, death, but there was a much deeper separation that He knew. He was experiencing on the cross, hell on the cross is what He experienced.

And the warning He gives is therefore much more serious than just speaking about physical separation and death, but the spiritual separation that only God in Christ can bridge.

[6 : 14] And so there's this sense of which He recognizes and sees very, very clearly in this perfect vision He sees the desperate root of sin.

And He sees the desperate cost of sin and the desperate reality of sin as being utterly destructive because what He sees is He sees that it's very depth, sin's motive will always make us want to kill off God.

That's the seriousness of sin, you know, because I'm going to think of sin, you know, oh, I did a little lie, a little cheat, or a little do something here and there, saying a wrong word. No, He sees it as much more serious.

Sin ultimately wants us to kill off God from our own experience and to allow ourselves to be Lord over our own lives. And He sees that and He knows that God in heaven, the great Holy Father can never exist in an environment where sin goes unchecked because its very focus is to destroy God and to destroy all that is good and loving and just.

And of course we see that. We see that being outworked in the rejection of the people to Jesus, the only innocent, sin-free, holy man who ever lived.

[7 : 33] The religious leaders and the people moving from their misunderstanding when He comes in riding on a donkey, here's the great Messiah, to just a number of days later, crucify Him, crucify Him.

Because it was inevitable, it's inevitable that sin, sin's ultimate reality is the destruction of God and killing off God as if that were possible.

But sin, in the hearts of these people, and if we'd been there, it would have been no different. Sin in the hearts of people wanted Jesus and His whole innocent, innocent and love dead.

But yet that same crucifixion became God's way forward. And His experience of hell on the cross becomes our root of salvation.

So in this chapter He's really wanting to get across because He's beginning to see it, the reality of our estrangement from God and what it means and the greatness of the salvation He's offering.

[8 : 57] So what I think is when we read a passage like this, if you've been honest with yourself, okay, I'll be honest with you, I just don't get the seriousness of sin as I know that.

And probably you don't either, I'm sure none of us do. And because if we did, we would love Him more and we would serve Him much more passionately and much in a much deeper committed way when we realized what He's redeemed us from.

And I think we would love Him and serve Him better. So what's happening here, what's happening here in this chapter, there's a couple of things that are happening, at least I'm sure there's many more. But Jesus is doing two things, Jesus in the first place is weeping, okay, Jesus is weeping.

And so I'm doing this tonight as well, it's a bad policy, preachers that are learning to preach here don't do what I say, well maybe, if it's from the Word that's fine.

But I'm going to the end of the chapter first, okay, and I'm doing that tonight as well, I'm actually going to the end of the book tonight, the Ecclesiastes. But the end of this chapter is the lament that Miriam read there at the end.

[10 : 13] Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, very famous lament, and he speaks about Him being like a mother hen longing for the people to come under His protection.

Jesus is weeping, what a great picture, isn't that a great picture? Jesus weeping. You know, He's just brutally exposed the hard hearts of the religious leaders with damning truth about their condition, and we're going to look at that as well.

And He goes on to give a very unflattering picture of Himself. It's not very regal is it? It's not very king like a mother hen. It's not what you expect of a picture of God, a mother hen.

It's a step beyond the undignified picture of the prodigal Father who tucks up His garment and guards His loins and runs out, not very dignified for a man of dignity of His time and place to go and see the estranged Son.

But this takes it a step further, mother hen. And He said, but this is His instinct, isn't it? Protection. That's what a mother hen would do, and the story of the hen that died for the sake of her chickens.

[11 : 31] It's instinctive that they would protect. And what Jesus is saying, He's saying, is the Incarnation's God's instinct, it's His instinct as Creator, as Father, as Son, as Holy Spirit to protect and to redeem and to save and to buy back humanity made in His own image.

And what's more than that, He's saying this way that He is going towards and across is the only way that He can protect us and save us and redeem us.

So we look at the cross, for example, and we're back into kind of brutal territory, aren't we, when we talk about the cross? And people will look at that today, maybe modern 21st century postmodern humanity.

We'll see what, it's just callus, it's rubbish, it's primitive. We don't need to believe in these kind of things today, it's made up.

I always ask the question, it's made up, why? Well, why is it made up? Why would you make up this? Why would you make up the salvation of a crucified Jew as your hope for the world?

[12 : 41] Or, or it's true. And what Jesus is saying is that it's my divine instinct, it's the only way. Redemption could only come if I was just substitute.

If I died in your place, if I took the wrath of God for your sin and died in your place, there's no other way. It's instinctive, trinitarian love provides this answer.

We take that or we reject it. So He uses parental love, the outstretched wings of love to reveal His heart, that He grieves bitterly at those unwilling to come to Him for love and protection.

And that's the picture of our salvation, you know, in our city, urban, our bay in life. Let's go along the Gorgiefarm, go along there and see the picture, see the kind of ongoing relationship of comfort, of strength, of love, of rescue, see it in these difficult times.

You know, I think sometimes as men, sorry ladies, I'm just going to speak for a minute to the men, I think as men we struggle with that whole idea of God as a mother hen, do we, coming under her protective wings?

[13 : 56] We think coming to know Jesus, needing a Savior, it's kind of weak. And we're men and we need to be strong and we need to stand up and we need to be protective ourselves rather than needing protective.

And that's fine, that's okay, but if you're drowning in the sea and the RNLI come past and they reach out a hand to you because you're drowning, you don't regard it as weakness to grasp hold of that hand.

And as you're lifted up, you find it's a woman. You wouldn't feel weak because of that. You'd be full of gratitude because of the strength that has pulled you up from drowning, the strong hand of a rescuer.

We ashamed as men, are we embarrassed to admit our weakness before the living God and that we need His rescue? Surely not. Please let not that be the case. It's 21st century men.

Let's be men that are willing to recognize God's great redemptive power. Jesus is weeping, but Jesus also here is warning.

[15 : 03] Verses 1 to 36. That's the first section of the chapter, it's a tough read. I hope you found that a tough read. I certainly find that a tough read. And let's remember who He's speaking to.

Verse 1, we're told, Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples, that's to whom He was speaking. In other words, Jesus really is speaking to those who Matthew recognized as he read this, we're going to become the church, the New Testament church, both the leaders and the people of the New Testament church, and Jesus is speaking to them.

And really what he's saying is, look, forget the old failed religious leadership and religious ideas of brokenness that have rejected God and the Messiah, even in the pretense of accepting Him, and recognize the kingdom of Him.

Matthew's all about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is different. And he wants to leadership the disciples, and he wants the crowds, the people, to know it's not good enough to put new wine into old wineskins.

There needs to be a radical rebirth in our thinking. So Jesus is warning, and he's contrasting the current failure of the religious leaders with the way he wants us to live in the kingdom.

[16 : 27] However, it's all about ministers and elders and people today. It's about us all, in other words, as we are in the kingdom of heaven.

These religious leaders had all the privileges, but most of them had rejected the Messiah. They were moral, they were respected, they were powerful people, but they had closed hearts.

They knew better than Jesus. So in Jesus exposing their heart traits, he is reminding us of why we need Him, and why in the New Testament church in 21st century Edinburgh, we should be very, very different.

We can't, when we go to the Bible, simply choose the truth that we think is palatable to us. We can't, we ought to be challenged by the ease with which we select truth that we find easy, and we need to move beyond that as believers, find ourselves in the presence of the living God.

So there's two sections here, very quickly look at that. Section one is verses one to twelve. Okay, if you've got your Bibles, you can look at that, if not look at it again. Verses one to twelve, where Jesus gives an overview, basically speaking about the attitudes of the scribes and the Pharisees.

[17 : 56] And really, I'm just going to let them speak. I'm not going to go through them in any detail, they are self-explanatory for the most part. But these attitudes reflect the spiritual deadness that was in the religious leadership of the day, in their willingness to reject Jesus.

But they are attitudes that even for us as Christians, with remaining sin in our hearts, we need to root out. If you don't find the eye of Jesus piercing in this chapter, I'm not sure where you ever would.

The eye of Jesus is piercing, as He speaks to us, and we need to let the truth sink in and apply it. I apply it, you apply it to our hearts, our lives, our attitudes to God, our attitudes to others, our attitudes to family, our attitudes to church.

And see where you need to cry out, as I need to cry out for forgiveness this morning. So there's five things He says in this first section.

The verse three, they didn't practice what they preached. Whoa, anyone here that wishes to be a preacher? Any preacher here, any preacher listening?

[19 : 12] Or that great, great, grave sin of not practicing, seeking to practice what we preach? Judgment will be greater for us.

Secondly, they didn't care about making life hard for others. They didn't give them any help. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear. They lay them on people's shoulders, but they don't help them.

They didn't care about making life difficult for others. I'm not sure how you would apply that today, maybe with the high standards of righteousness or morality that you expect your wife or your husband or your children or your friends to have, but you don't apply it in grace to yourself.

Thirdly, verse five, they love to show off. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. Oh, it was great to be seen. They like to be seen in public.

And maybe we like to show off. It's Christians show off a bit of intelligence. Show off in church, show off in the academy, show off in our studies, show off in our workplaces, because we feel that we've got much to show off with.

[20 : 23] But yet all, everything we have is God's gift. Is it no place for showing off? Verses six to ten, they love to have the place of honor at feast, the best seats in the synagogues.

They love to be important and have status. Are you challenged by that? Wanting status, wanting significant, wanting a name for yourself, that's what they loved.

And Jesus is saying, these are the things we don't make up the kingdom of heaven. These are the things we move from in the kingdom of heaven. And verses 11 and 12, the end of this first section, the greatest among you shall be their servant, whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

They loved to be served, but they thought serving was above them. And that should not be the way for us as Christians.

It should never be that we love people looking after and serving us in some kind of deserving way, but look down on the ordinariness, the sacrifice, the cost of serving.

[21 : 40] So that's the five attitudes really that he speaks about. And in section two, he just exposes their behaviors, its attitudes and behavior.

And this is the pronouncement of his woes, his seven woes, mourning for their deadness spiritually. Behavior that he sees as sinful, that unchecked separates them from the living God.

And similarly in our lives, he's in giving the negative. We don't see it now. In the old days, you used to see when you got photographs, you used to get the negatives with them.

Don't get it. Get a packet. Remember that? You got the negatives at the front. And that's what Jesus is doing here. He's giving us the negative of what the kingdom of heaven ought and needs to be like by grace.

So he says of their behavior, the first thing, I've got six, I've put two together. They blocked the way of the kingdom of heaven by the way that they lived and the way that they thought.

[22 : 48] Verse 13. You know, they shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Okay? Now you broaden that.

How are we living? How are we thinking? Are we causing people to stumble? Are we not giving them the opportunity to come into the kingdom? Are we by our attitude and our thinking living contrary to the principles and the life of the kingdom of heaven?

The second one, very powerful. The danger of having a zeal for moralistic truth and powerfully persuading others to think similarly to you, but then they become as self-righteous and more hellish than you are.

Now that's strong words. That's what he says in verse 15. He says you go, it's such a powerful word, isn't it? You travel over land and sea to make a single proselyte.

And then when he does so, you make them twice as much a son of hell as you are. Now these are strong words. He's saying if we don't have Christ in our lives and we're trying to persuade someone to live the way we live, but we don't have Christ, we're making them twice as hellish as we are, because they will miss out on the grace and the goodness of Jesus, because we have also missed out on it.

[24 : 11] If we make people moralistic and religious and churchy so that they're divisive and self-righteous and separatist, we're children of hell.

We're not children of heaven. And the third one is breaking promises and vows. In verse 16, you know, that whole section, 16 to 22, he talks about swearing, making vows and the gold of the temple and the temple.

Basically what they were doing, they were using different standards of vows to be free to break them. In other words, if you swear by the gold of the temple, you've got to mark your word.

If you swear by the temple itself, it's okay to just ignore it. So he was... There were double standards basically. Their word was not their bond.

That's what he's saying. Truth. It's applicable, isn't it, to us? That truth is a mark of the kingdom. You know, in your workplace, in your home, and in our lives that we speak truth.

[25 : 16] You know, there's a word... You know I'm bad for making up words. You'd always tell me that. There's a word that society makes... I really hate this word. I hate... I see politicians using it now quite a lot.

They say, well, actually we misspoke. No, you didn't. You lied. That's what... Miss-speaking is a strange word. Miss-speaking is not making a mistake.

Miss-speaking is double-talk for saying, actually, I lied. But we don't like to use that word because it's so pejorative. And Christians should not be guilty of miss-speaking.

We should not be guilty of making promises and not keeping them. Our word, not being our bond. We're not to be smart and polished but untrustworthy.

Jesus... Jesus is negatively presenting the principles of the kingdom. Then the fourth one are priorities, you know.

[26 : 12] These guys, verses 23 and 24, they were just expert at tithing, you know, the mint that they had and that they used. They would take a tithe of it and they would use it mint and the dill in the coming.

But they neglected the weightier matters of law and justice and mercy. In other words, their priorities were wrong. They cared only about the little things and not about the big things. Now Jesus is not saying, don't care about the little things.

He's saying, care about the little things but don't neglect the big things. And he uses a great picture in the Aramaic as which he was speaking. It was words that were rhyming that uses, you know, you strain it on that but you swallow a camel.

And it was kind of rhyming in the original. So maybe like for us it would be you strain out a midge but you swallow a mule. It was kind of something rhyming, almost humorous about it that he's saying it's ridiculous.

You know, so sometimes in church we get all fussed about tiny insignificant things, you know, about the colours of stuff and about just little things maybe.

[27 : 19] But we ignore justice and mercy and grace and forgiveness. What are our priorities? What makes you, what riles you up? What do you focus your attention on?

What do I, what are the big things that take our attention as those in the Kingdom of Heaven? Then I've taken the five and six woes together versus 25 to 28.

You know, again, very powerful pictures. The tombs, they clean the outside of the cup and the plate but inside it's full of germs. That's very relevant just now, isn't it?

We're all cleaning a lot. Hopefully in November we'll be taking communion together for the four Sundays in the morning in November. He's going to make sure the cups are clean and the inside and the out.

But they didn't clean the inside and then he goes on to give an even more ugly picture of tombstones that painted whitewashed on the outside. They're lovely and clean inside, full of deadness and he's saying, you know, you're putting all your effort into appearances, all your effort into looking good on the outside to other people but you don't care about what I think God says and I know the inside.

[28 : 33] You know, is that, that's a temptation in church, isn't it? It's a temptation for preachers to just be good on the outside, temptation for elders and leaders and deacons and others to look good on the outside but what about the motives of our hearts?

You know, what about the pride, the selfishness, the bitterness, the greed, the lust, these things that nobody necessarily needs to know about although we'll sometimes come out in our actions.

Jesus says, clean the inside, get the inside of our lives right. He's pointing to Himself. He's pointing to grace. He's pointing to mother hen, saying come to me for protection and for cleansing and for safety and for life.

And the last one then is denying a sense of guilt which is just for all who reject Jesus and forgetting, particularly for those of us in the church who haven't come to faith, the advantages and the privileges that are ours, that we are spurning.

You know, these Pharisees, these Jews, you know, they had great privileges. They were God's Old Testament people. Their fathers and forefathers had rejected the prophets.

[29 : 55] They had an opportunity to accept Jesus but they denied their advantages and their privileges and they denied the sense of guilt that was theirs for doing so.

And so it's a huge responsibility for all of us. In summary, if we look at the number of words Jesus uses in some of these chapters, he says he uses the word blind five times and he uses the word hypocrites six times.

That's really the summary of what he's saying. Don't be spiritually blind. Don't be hypocrites. Don't have an outward show. Let Jesus work into your heart.

It's very strong stuff. One hour in church with God's people will not cut it for us. It's about dealing with God in our hearts day to day, moment by moment, second by second and recognizing His beautiful, glorious, courageous, strong, divine love in our place.

So don't be blind and don't be a hypocrite. But do be like Jesus' picture of the mother hen. Love that grace and compassion for others that He had, even though they rejected Him.

[31 : 23] And many people among your friends reject Jesus, don't they? Let's not be self-righteous about them. Let's not damn them. Let's be like Jesus and pray to heaven that they will yet come in.

That they will not keep rejecting the great and beautiful Son of God. You know, this is a vision of the kingdom of heaven, and it says everything is not right.

It's a funeral lament, and we need to recognize we live in a day and in a time between the first and second coming of Jesus that there is much to lament.

We're not yet in glory. And let's reflect His heart of generous grace and allow Him to partner with us, to transform us, to battle against the ugliness of sin in our hearts, the hypocrisy and the blindness.

And let's run to Him afresh and new, old Christian or new, for protection and for grace and for a life of courage. Take our guilt, just give it to Him.

[32 : 33] He's paid the price and find in Him safety from the ongoing ravages of death and judgment. Let's pray.

Father God, we ask and pray that You would help us to see more clearly. Sometimes the Bible seems so very far away from our experience as we fail to see humanity in it and fail to see our own humanity in it and fail to see God's divinity in Christ through the Spirit.

So help us to see more clearly, deal with our blindness and also, Lord, forgive our hypocrisy. There are so many layers to our hypocrisy.

It's hard to even, it's hard to sometimes even verbalize or know what it is. And yet we don't need to know, we simply need to recognize that we need Your grace and Your forgiveness and the honesty and the humility that comes from putting our trust in You.

And may we do that. In Jesus' name, amen.