

Chapter 23 is about bad leaders. We consider this from two points, before exile and during exile. Jeremiah preached this before the exile, and so we read this mindful of those who heard his warnings. Then the exile happened. So the second viewpoint is the exiles who read the Book of Jeremiah while they were paying the cost of following bad leaders.

Previously, we studied verses 1-8, about bad kings, and the need for The Righteous King. There were good kings and bad kings in history.

Now beginning here in verse 9, Jeremiah changes the subject and now deals with bad leaders of religious life.

We call them bad pastors, and in the Old Testament they called them false prophets. A prophet was a man who spoke the Word of God, without a book to speak from. For example, Jeremiah himself spoke as God gave him messages to speak, and then later the book of Jeremiah was written down. The difference for a pastor today is that he speaks the Word of God from the Book that has already been written down by God.

There are good and bad kings, good and bad prophets, good and bad pastors. The main point of this sermon is this...**Bogus pastors, who do not preach the truth of God, are dangerous and should be a concern to all of us.**

1. God commands us not to be drawn by them into a false sense of security. (v.9-20)

Verse 9 begins with 3 words "*concerning the prophets*" and that is the heading for the rest of the chapter. Jeremiah is in shock in verse 9, because he was called to prophecy 1) that the false prophets had become bad and 2) that the LORD would severely judge them. Verse 10, Jeremiah reflects on the fact that it was not just the prophets who were bad, but the chosen people of God were following the prophets into adultery and other evil activities. Verse 11, even the priests were following the prophets into ungodliness. The result was that evil was even found within the house of The LORD, the temple. They were not willing to keep anything as sacred. In verse 12, the LORD declared that He would punish them. In verse 13, the prophets over in Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, a century earlier, got involved in Baal worship, which had its own unseemly wickedness, and was destroyed by the attacking Assyrians. In verse 14, God brings the comparison to the prophets in Jerusalem, who were no better, openly espousing adultery and lies, to the extent that God Himself compared Jerusalem to another place that everybody knew - Sodom and Gomorrah! As Genesis chapter 19 presents, Sodom and Gomorrah were cities of homosexuality and other wickedness. Here God was evaluating the horrible things in Jerusalem, and not seeing anything different from what God saw in Sodom and Gomorrah. What will

God do about it? Considering that God wiped out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is a stark warning about what is coming. Verse 15 God says the false prophets were the ones responsible. It was from the prophets of Jerusalem that “*ungodliness has gone out into all the land.*” God will punish the false prophets with bitter food and poisoned water.

Verse 16, since the false prophets fill people with vain hope and speak from their own minds, not from the mouth of The LORD, therefore God commanded the people not to listen to the false prophets! Do not be influenced by them. What is it that false prophets say that is so damaging? They minimize sin. Verse 17, they despise the word of The LORD about judgment and exile, and instead they say that no disaster is coming. Verse 18, they do not stand in the council of The LORD, which means that they do not pray. If they had prayed with Jeremiah, they would speak the same message as Jeremiah, about war and disaster, instead of speaking about a false peace, when there is no peace. Verse 19, the storm of The LORD has begun, and the wrath of God will be seen in the judgment on the wicked. Verse 20, The anger of the LORD will not stop until God has accomplished God’s purposes. It is another prophecy of the exile that we read at the end of verse 20, “*In the latter days you will understand it clearly.*”

2. They are not God’s spokespersons, even though they think that they are. (v.21-29)

Verse 21 shows that the false prophets were not sent by God. Verse 22 repeats that the false prophets did not stand in God’s council, or else they would not have such an easygoing attitude toward sin. Verse 23 shows that God knows what is happening nearby and God knows what is happening far away, and therefore, as verse 24 makes clear, no one can hide from God. Verse 25, God has heard what the false prophets are saying, when they try to mislead people by saying I have a dream, or I have a vision from God, or I have a word from the Lord. God hears what they are saying, and while the impressionable people were fooled and manipulated, God Himself knew that the messages were not from Him! Verse 26 laments the lies the prophets tell others, and the lies that the prophets tell themselves. Verse 27 questions the goal of the false prophets – they want to make God’s people forget God’s name, just like a previous generation forgot God’s name and worshipped the false god Baal instead. Verse 28, God says go ahead and let both the true prophets and the false prophets speak, and the difference will be as obvious as the difference between straw and wheat. This is a statement of God’s ability to differentiate in His coming judgments. False prophecies are straw, useless for feeding people. True prophecies are grain, nourishing. Verse 29, in fact, unlike the worthless words of false teachers, God’s Word spoken by true teachers is quite powerful. How can it be expressed just how powerful God’s Word is, in contrast to the ineffectual words of false teachers? God’s Word is like fire

that can burn up falsehood as easily as fire burns up straw, and God's Word is like a hammer that can break up even the bedrock of false teachers into pieces.

False teachers are soft on sin. They want everyone to have intimacy and pleasure whenever you want, wherever you want, with whomever you want. They deny the sinfulness of sin, and then also deny the justice of God's coming judgment. One false message leads to another! They tell sinners that God is not angry with them. If there is no sin, and no wrath, and no judgment, then who needs a cross?

Jeremiah gave God's truth, which is God's strong teaching that sin always brings judgment. It is not safe to toy with lust and pornography and adultery. It is not safe to be a false minister misleading people on these topics. The pro-gay teachings that both imaginations and actions are just fine with God are false. God speaks plainly about evil desires and about evil actions. God teaches forgiveness for those who repent, and the expectation that they will live holy lives. The only way to escape God's wrath for sin is to trust Jesus Christ for salvation, believing that He died on the cross to cleanse you of your sins.

God's people do not come to God's house to hear what a man has to say. God's people come to God's house to hear what God has to say.

3. God is against bogus pastors, and God Himself will judge them. (v.30-40)

In case it had not been clear yet, God says in verse 30, "*Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares The LORD...*" As long as we are laboring to be very clear, let's be very clear which prophets, specifically, is God against? Verse 30 answers that – God is against the ones "*who steal My words from one another.*" Since the false prophets do not stand in God's council to get Words from God, they steal God's Words, and change them. Look how God explains it in the next verse, verse 31, "*Behold, I am against the prophets, declares The LORD, who use THEIR tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.'*"

What makes a false prophet false is that he speaks his own message, and falsely attributes it to God.

What makes a true prophet true is that he gets his prophecy straight from God. If a prophet wants to know God's truth, he must go to God to get it!

Verse 32, because the false prophets claim that they get their dreams and their words from God, they are lying and the truth is that people do not gain any benefit from false prophets.

Starting in verse 33, there is a pun, or a double meaning or a play on the word "burden." A burden has two meanings here 1) a burden is God's message that a prophet is to preach, and 2) a burden is something heavy to be carried. Basically, they treated their personal opinion as if it were a message from God, and God was weary of it. So, the false teachers claim to have a message from the God to preach, but instead God told the false teachers that they are the burden, something heavy to carry, and that God will cast them off! Verse 34, God will punish the false

prophets for even saying that they know the burden of the LORD. Verse 35, everyone asks, what does God say? Verse 36, the false prophets pervert the words of the living God. Verse 37, God instructs the people to reverse the question and turn around and ask the false prophet, what does God say? Verse 38, if the false prophet responds by actually saying what God commanded them not to say, then verse 39, God will throw the false prophet out. Verse 40, the result for the false prophets will be everlasting reproach and perpetual shame!

Conclude: Applying this chapter to modern Christians in America.

1) Be broken about false pastors. Jeremiah did not get mad at them. Jeremiah did not get even with them. Jeremiah wept for them. Verse 9, *“My heart is broken within me...”* Is that our reaction? When we hear what people are saying about God, we should be deeply disturbed – for them. Jeremiah was not smug and judgmental, but rather was internally weighted with sadness and lamenting. This is part of why Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. He wept that God’s people would not repent, including the false prophets. Listen to the words of Jesus on this topic in Matthew 7:21-23, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’* We need to teach about false teachers from our pulpits, and refute error, but we must be as charitable as possible, and also fully humble. If it were not for the grace of God to us, we would be doing the same things! When we look around at churches, it breaks our hearts. How are the cities of America different from the cities Sodom and Gomorrah? We mourn for our cities and our country! We mourn for the bogus pastors. We preach the truth ever so clearly, yet with compassion in our hearts, with a lump in our throats, and with tears in our eyes. Our first application is to be broken about false pastors.

2) Keep your fear of God and His Word.

The Words of God is like a hammer that breaks stone into pieces! True prophets were men like the prophet Moses, who talked with God on the mountain, and the prophet Isaiah, who saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, and the apostle Paul, who was caught up to the third heaven, and the apostle John, who was in the Spirit, seeing the glories of the kingdom. Scripture comes from the throne of the Most High God.

Only what is sent from God can be trusted.

Jesus was sent from God. Jesus Christ is the only true prophet for the people of God. According to Jeremiah chapter 23, a true prophet is one who has met in the council of God. Jesus Christ meets that qualification. When the Holy Spirit

overshadowed the womb of the Virgin Mary and she became pregnant with Jesus, we know where Jesus came from. Jesus came to earth from the very council room of the Most High God! Jesus had heard with His own ears the angels whose job it is to never stop saying, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*” (Rev. 4:8) Yes, Jesus has been in the council of the LORD God, His heavenly Father, and Jesus has heard the Words of God. When the false prophets in the day of Jesus threatened to put Him to death, He said, “...*you seek to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.*” John 8:40 Keep your fear of the LORD God, and His Word that You have heard.

3) Show your respect for God and His Word by reading His Word every day yourself, reading it every day with your spouse and family, and by attending our church, every time the Word of God is being preached. Christ said in Matthew 24:11, “...*many false prophets will arise, and lead many astray.*” The best way to avoid being led astray is to keep growing in your knowledge of the Bible. I wonder whether Christians pay more attention to blogs and comments and comments on the comments, then to their studying the Bible. I saw a federal form recently that had for gender, male, female, and other. The Bible says God made people male or female. What is the other category? A lie. A nation without truth sickens. The danger is that a sick culture feels perfectly normal to those who are living in it. Americans are becoming oblivious to the sins of an approaching culture death. It is vitally important for us to safeguard our souls by reading the truth of God’s Word as a habit, even more consistent than our habit of eating food. For our fellow citizens, it must be very confusing. For us, it must not be confusing. The courageous few speak up. Those who stay in God’s Word. Show respect for God by reading His Word every day yourself.

4) Be careful of your careless words. Mt. 12:36,37, “*on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” Do not speak about getting a word from the Lord, as if something new were going to appear from heaven about your big decision. Do not say, “I feel led” or “The Lord has laid it on my heart,” as if that is some sort of divine revelation. God told me this and that. God told me to tell you this and that! No, one lesson from this chapter is that when the false prophets said “The burden of the LORD,” it was offensive to God! We are people of the Book, not people of the daily tweet and people of the weekly upgrade, and people of the monthly transition to a whole new system. No, God’s book is complete. The table of contents is closed at 66 books. We have exactly how many books, chapters, verses, words, and even how many dotted I’s and crossed T’s that we are going to get from God. God has given us all that we need for that big decision. So, be careful of your careless words.

5) Listen for the voice of Christ, found in true preaching of His Word. True preachers insist that judgment must precede life. The Christ needed to suffer and then enter His glory. It was the only way. It must happen. We need the cross, because we have offended God by our sins. Mt. 16:21, *“Jesus began to show His disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* Acts 26:23, *“the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”*

And put your seatbelt on. Because the true, unadulterated Word of God will rip you up, and it will fix you up. You will be convicted, and then you will be comforted. You will run to Christ and Him crucified, and receive nourishment for your soul. The darker the day in which you are living, and the darker it is for your children and grandchildren, the more thankful you should be for the team of pastors in a faithful denomination.

Let me reverse the main point of this sermon, and state it inversely.

Here is the main point of the sermon. Bogus pastors, who do not preach the truth of God, are dangerous and should be a concern to all of us.

Here is the inverse truth: *True pastors, who faithfully preach the truth of God, are a safeguard for us, and should be a source of God’s calm and peace for all of us.*

John 10:3-5, *“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”*

Listen for the voice of Christ Your Savior when His grace is preached.