

Committed to God's Agenda **Luke 13:31-35**

I have a weakness. Actually, I have many weaknesses – but one will do for this morning. My weakness is that I like to please other people. Now, I suspect that, for many of you, that doesn't sound like a weakness. You think, surely that's a good thing.

- Isn't the desire to please others a way of bringing happiness into their lives?
- Isn't the desire to please others the sort of attitude that leads to keeping the peace?
- And doesn't the Bible command us to love others?

That's all true.

The reason this is a weakness in me is that my desire to please others is usually self-centred at its base. If I get underneath all the surface motives – all the nice things I say to myself to justify what I'm doing – and get to the real underlying reason why I want to please others:

- I want other people to think I'm nice.
- I want a reputation for helpfulness and kindness and cooperation and dependability.
- I want to look godly to others.

Now, there's nothing wrong with being nice or helpful or kind or dependable or godly. They're all good things. I should want those characteristics in my life. Being a disciple of Jesus means growing in each of those qualities. But if I'm doing them from self-centred reasons – if I'm doing them because I want your approval of me – the result is I'm your slave. I'm imprisoned by your opinion of me. Thus, I'll jump to your every whim. I won't be able to refuse anything you ask me. I'll be driven by your

agenda rather than God's. I'll want to please you rather than please God.

This has all sorts of practical implications.

- Sometimes I may over-commit myself in an effort to please too many people.
- Sometimes I'll get torn in half as I try to please two people who want opposite things.
- Sometimes I may not say the hard thing God wants you to hear because I fear it will offend you.
- Sometimes it will result in me doing good things at the cost of the better things God wants me to do.

And so it goes on. It's a dangerous weakness.

Committed to His Work

In today's passage, Jesus is given opportunity to please others: the Pharisees and Herod. The Pharisees warn him to get out of town for His own safety. Jesus chooses the path God has mapped out for Him. He continues with the agenda God's given Him – not the agenda the Pharisees have for Him.

Verse 31 raises a couple of questions for us.

- Was Herod really out to get Jesus or did the Pharisees just make this up? We don't really know. The last time Luke told us about Herod was back in 9:7

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things

about?" And he tried to see Him.

At that stage, Herod seems interested in Jesus – even perplexed. It's quite possible he's now moved to the "annoyed and want to get rid of Jesus" stage. He'd got rid of one prophet – John the Baptist. There's no reason why he shouldn't want to get rid of another one. But it's also possible that these Pharisees simply made up this story to scare Jesus off their home patch.

- And that leads to the second question: Are these Pharisees genuinely concerned for Jesus' well-being – or are they just trying to scare Jesus away – or could they be trying to discredit Jesus' message by showing Him up to be a coward who runs in the face of personal danger? Again, we don't know.

Now, they're both interesting questions. And there are real answers to them. It's just that we're not told. They're not Luke's focus in telling this story.

We are told Jesus' response. Verse 32:

Go tell that fox, "I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal." In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

A couple of expressions require explanation. The term *fox* could mean:

- a person of no real significance: a lion was a significant creature – you took notice of a lion – but a fox was a long way down the pecking-order;
- a cunning person or a deceiver: similar to the way we use the expression *outfoxed*;
- a destructive person: like putting a fox in the hen-

house.

All of them could make sense in this context:

- Compared with God and what God wants, Herod's schemes were of little significance to Jesus.
- Getting Pharisees to spread rumours could be a cunning way to deal with Jesus.
- The decapitation of John the Baptist was a fairly destructive act.

None of the possibilities is particularly complimentary to Herod. All of them indicate Jesus' lack of fear of any supposed threat from this king.

Jesus' goal is Jerusalem. Luke's already made that clear back in 9:51. We looked at that last week. Jesus says the same here in verse 33. And it's clear that He goes there to die. The expression *today and tomorrow and on the third day* is not intended literally. As you read through the rest of Luke, it's quite clear He doesn't get to Jerusalem within the next couple of days. This expression indicates an uncertain period of time. Its exact length is not stated. It's a relatively short period – and it's a period that has a definite end point.

The end point's the bit that's of crucial importance. That's where the focus is.

- What happens on *the third day* – verse 32.
- What happens on *the next day* – verse 33.

Jesus will continue to drive out demons and heal people. He'll go about business as usual – the business God's given Him to do. Herod's not going to interfere with that. But the important thing is His goal. It's what happens when He gets to Jerusalem. That's the focus of what He says. He will finish the task God's given Him – both His

ministry of healing and exorcism and His death at the hands of His enemies at Jerusalem.

There are a number of ironies in this passage. Some of them, I think, are intentional. Some, I'm not sure.

- The Pharisees warn Jesus about His possible death at the hands of Herod – as if that'll somehow scare Him off and get Him to bend to their will. Jesus' whole mission centres round His upcoming death in Jerusalem. He will indeed die – but it won't be on Herod's terms. It'll be in God's timing and at God's place. That one I think is intentional.
- The other side of that is that Jesus is actually safe where He is – for He knows He must of divine necessity die in Jerusalem. So, until He gets to Jerusalem, He doesn't need to fear death from Herod or anyone else.
- Secondly, Jesus has just warned the nation of the danger they face in missing the door. On the whole they fail to heed the warning. They will thus be excluded from the kingdom. The Pharisees now warn Jesus of the danger He faces. Jesus likewise fails to heed their warning. In so doing, He brings about the possibility for them to enter the kingdom.
- Thirdly, Jesus warns them to make sure they enter the narrow door. Give it top priority. Don't let anything distract you from that task. Unknowingly, the Pharisees now tempt Jesus not to take the door God has for Him. The temptation is for Jesus to take some path other than the one God has for Him. Jesus resists that temptation. He makes every effort to follow the plans God has for Him – as difficult as they are.

God's agenda –being about the things God would have us be about – remains important.

- For Jesus, that agenda involved His ministry and His appointment with death in Jerusalem.
- For us, that agenda involves the things summarised in our mission statement: presenting Christ to everyone and presenting everyone mature in Christ.

In this world, there's always opposition to God's agenda.

Others will come up with different agendas for us.

- Our culture puts strong pressure on us to pursue the agenda of materialism – eat, drink and be merry and, if you can't afford it yet, put it on credit and pay for it later. Focus on getting your share of the pie – or, even better, more than your share. Get more, spend more, consume more. It keeps the economy going.
- Or it may be the agenda of success. Your role in this world is to achieve recognition. It may be top marks in the HSC. It may be professional status in your career. It may be a good house in an affluent suburb. Show everyone you've made it in life.
- Or it may be the agenda of popularity. Make sure you fit in with the right crowd. Go to the right places. Wear the right clothes. Participate in the right activities. Fit in. Don't be different. Don't do anything nerdy that would damage your image.

And so it goes on. Politicians have agendas for us. Big companies have agendas for us. Advertising agencies have agendas for us. So do our teachers and parents and friends – even our enemies.

And when you resist these agendas, you'll often face the disbelief and the ridicule and even the scare tactics used

to get you to conform.

- Try telling someone you don't watch M-rated TV shows and movies because you're concerned they may have an ungodly influence on you.
- Try telling someone you don't go out to restaurants because you want to support another child through some overseas Christian ministry.
- Try telling someone you're not going away for your holidays because you want to use the money saved to support gospel ministry in Africa.

You can see the look on their face. It says: "You poor deluded idiot. It's OK for you to have a bit of religion if you need that sort of crutch – but that's taking it too far."

Our agendas must stay centred on the cross. Sure, it's not in exactly the same sense as Jesus.

- For Him, the cross was the endpoint of His ministry on this earth.
- For Him, the cross was the place of His physical agony and death.
- For Him, the cross was where He faced God's punishment of our sins.

That's His agenda, not ours.

But, because it was His agenda, He calls His followers to take up the agenda of His cross. Indeed, there's an element of divine necessity to it.

- That agenda involves living the message of His cross – dying to the self-centred, sinful, anti-God way of life we used to live and being raised to the new life of godliness and purity He'd have us live.
- That agenda involves proclaiming the message of His cross – telling others of the salvation Jesus offers and encouraging them to strive to enter that

narrow door of salvation.

That's why we're left on earth – not to have fun or to make a name for ourselves or to build up our own little kingdoms of wealth, but to live as exemplary citizens of the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour. That's God's agenda for us.

We'll be tempted away from that.

- Some will try to seduce us to other agendas with promises of comfortable lifestyles or offers of greater pleasure.
- Some will try to scare us away from God's agenda with threats of the dangers involved and promises of ridicule and persecution.
- Some will suggest substitute agendas of charity and good works that avoid the message of Jesus and the centrality of the cross.

It'll happen in all sorts of ways. We must resist. We must focus on the goal God's given us and keep that as our priority.

Committed to His People

Having affirmed His commitment to God's timetable and God's agenda, Jesus then affirms His commitment to His people. Verse 34:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

It's a tender, compassionate picture. Again and again,

Jesus has warned Israel about the consequences of rejecting Him. Now, he laments their lack of response. He grieves over the self-destructive path they've chosen. For them, the sand in the hour-glass is running out. They're in grave danger of following the pattern laid down by their ancestors. If only they'd learn from their history, they'd see it's a disastrous pattern.

The mother hen's concern is for her chicks. She wants to care for them, nurture them, protect them. She does all she can to look after them – even at great risk to herself. For an enemy to get to the chicks under the hen's wings, they have to come through the hen first. And that's how Jesus is – God is – with His people. He wants to care for them, nurture them and protect them.

But there's a problem: they don't want Jesus. Instead of being like normal chicks and running to the protection of their mother's wings when she warns of danger, they want to stay out in the open. They want to trust in their own abilities to protect themselves. They want to proclaim their own independence. God wants to protect them – but they aren't willing.

This isn't a new thing. Israel – for I think the term Jerusalem in verse 34 represents the nation as a whole – much the same way we can refer to Canberra to represent the whole of Australia. Israel has a long history of rejecting God and God's messengers.

- Think of the problems Moses had with the people right through the time of their wanderings in the Sinai Peninsula.
- Think of the Judges period when they kept forsaking God and coming back and forsaking Him

again and coming back again and forsaking Him yet again.

- Think of Jezebel's program of killing off God's prophets and Obadiah's rescue of them by hiding them in caves.
- Think of the treatment given to prophets like Amos and Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

And now they're rejecting Jesus. He comes as a prophet to them. He's also much more than a prophet, but He is a prophet as well. He's delivered God's word. He's taught them about God's kingdom. He's invited them to enter. He's brought God's warning to them if they refuse. And they will treat Him like the earlier prophets – even worse. They'll hear His words, but they won't heed them. They'll continue on the destructive path they've chosen – even to the extent of executing Jesus in Jerusalem. Jesus wants to gather them under His wings – He offers them salvation – but they aren't willing. They want to stand on their own.

And so God gives them what they want. The NIV has translated verse 35 on the basis of the parallel passage in Matthew 23:38. And so some see here a picture of exile renewed:

- that as God kicked them out of the land in the time of the Assyrians and Babylonians and thus left the land untended and desolate,
- so He'll kick them out again and the land will again become untended and desolate.

And that's certainly a possible meaning.

But Luke doesn't have the Greek word for *desolate* on this occasion. He simply has Jesus saying:

Your house will be left to you.

In other words, I'll abandon you to your own inadequate devices. It's very fair. They claim they want to do things without God – that's exactly what God gives them. They claim to want to live without God – that's what God gives them. Their life is left to them. It's the very essence of hell. They get life without God's help.

But even then, Jesus says He won't abandon them forever. He doesn't leave them without hope. He quotes from Psalm 118:26

*I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say,
"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."*

These words are picked up by the crowds on Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem. Luke 19:37

When He came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Yet, at that time, the religious leaders continued to reject Him. They sought to destroy Him. And a few days later, they persuaded the crowds to turn against Him. That's not the occasion Jesus has in mind here in chapter 13.

Rather, it's the occasion we saw in Zechariah last year. Zechariah 12:10

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

The time will come when they mourn over what they've done to their Messiah.

What Jesus says in verse 34 is exactly what happens.

- Jesus warns them to make every effort to enter the door while the opportunity is there.
- Jesus warns them that they'll kill Him in Jerusalem just like they've done to prophets before Him.

They ignore the warnings. They go ahead and do just what Jesus says they'll do. And so, God abandons them. They refuse to come under God's wings. They're left to the consequences of that choice. They're on the outside while people from all nations are entering God's banquet. Not all of them. There were Jewish people in the early church. Indeed, to start with, the whole church was Jewish. Not all of them failed to pay attention to Jesus' warnings – but the nation as a whole did.

So, what are we to do with a passage like this today? Is it simply something of historical interest to us? This is what Jesus said would happen and it happened just like Jesus said it would – that sort of thing. It is that, but I think we can take more from it than that. Three things.

First, it's because of this that the gospel message came to us. Turn to Romans 11:11

Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

Paul's talking about the current position of Israel – the position they're in because they rejected Jesus. He spends three chapters of Romans discussing it at some length – and we don't have time to go into detail about that this

morning. This verse is part of that discussion. He says it's because of Israel's rejection of Jesus that the gospel's come to the Gentiles – to non-Jews.

Most of us here this morning aren't Jews. We're not directly part of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants. We're not part of the Jewish nation. Yet, part of that covenant was that, through Abraham, God would bless all the nations of earth. That happened through Abraham's descendant – Jesus. It continues to happen as this message of Jesus is taken to non-Jews. Their refusal to enter the door brings the opportunity to us.

Secondly, we need to take exactly the same warning Jesus gave these original Jews. It doesn't actually change. OK, we're not going to crucify Jesus all over again here in Bathurst. That option's not open to us. But, other than that, we could simply paraphrase what Jesus says here:

O Bathurst, Bathurst, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you.

That warning involves three things:

- First, Jesus' offer of salvation remains the same. He offers you the protection of His wings. He wants to gather you under that protection. That's the place of safety and security. Make sure you enter in the narrow door while there's still time.
- Secondly, many people today still remain unwilling. It's not that they're not invited. It's not that they don't qualify for protection. It's not that there's a bouncer on the door with specific instructions to

keep them out. It's simply that they're not willing. They don't want Jesus. They want to stand on their own.

- And so, thirdly, God gives them that. He abandons them to what they say they want – eternity without Him. The only way to avoid that is to turn to Jesus and accept the protection He offers. Will you do that? Will you continue to do that?

Finally, there's the matter of Jesus' compassion. Jesus leaves His followers on earth to take up the agenda of the cross. For Jesus, that agenda includes this desire to bring people under the protection of His salvation. As His followers grow more like Him, so they will share that desire. For us, that desire includes the longing to see the people of Bathurst gathered under the wings of His salvation.