

98-01-25a

This is Sunday, the 25th of January, 1998. Let's begin our worship this morning in a word of prayer. Thank you, Father, for this day and for the many blessings that you have bestowed on us.

We thank you for our privilege that we enjoy this morning of assembling with believers of like mind, believers that value your word and understand the ministry of your spirit. We thank you for the blessings that we enjoy through fellowship with one another and mutual encouragement. We thank you for the sustaining power of your word and of your spirit that gives our lives meaning and purpose and enables us to live in a way that pleases you.

We pray this morning that as we study the truth of your word, as we spend time in fellowship together, that your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be glorified, that we will be equipped for every good work, that the truth we review and learn from your word will become a part of the resources in our souls. We pray that our lives will accomplish your purpose, that we will fulfill our function and our calling and will fulfill the opportunity that you have given each one of us to reflect the glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We ask it in his name.

Amen. For our scripture reading this morning, turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew chapter 23. This section of Matthew 23, which begins in verse 13, is a song of woe directed to the Pharisees.

This passage has antecedents, Old Testament parallels, that you can find in Ezekiel and Isaiah and others of the major and minor prophets, where various groups, whether they are nations or cities or individuals, categories of individuals, are addressed by God, their sins are enumerated and their judgment is stated. This is Jesus acting in his office as prophet to Israel, stating or singing one of these woe songs. We sometimes talk in humorous terms about a song of woe or singing a song of woe, but this was a very serious function that was performed by prophets in Israel.

Matthew 23, 13. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for you neither go in yourselves nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers.

Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of Gehenna as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, whoever swears by the temple it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.

Fools and blind, for which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And whoever swears by the altar it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

And he who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits on it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone.

Blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish that the outside of them may be clean also.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous and say if we had lived in the days of our fathers we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of your father's guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers, how can you escape the condemnation of Gehenna? 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. 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. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

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. See, your house is left to you desolate. For I say to you, you shall see me no more until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

This sevenfold condemnation that Jesus pronounces as he stands outside the city looking over the rooftops and gates and walls of Jerusalem is a terrible commentary on the religion of that day. The scribes and the Pharisees were the pastors and the teachers in

Israel. They were the custodians of the law.

They were the custodians and the guides for worship life and biblical life in Israel. And in condemning the leadership, Jesus points out what worship in Israel had become because of their self-indulgence, their attention to their reputations, their honor before men. In this and many other places, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of seeking to please men and to be notable among men and be approved by men and not having the heart toward God that characterizes genuine worship, genuine obedience.

The link in this passage to our study in Genesis is, of course, in verse 35. Jesus says as a result of these seven charges, seven areas of failure, on this generation will come all the righteous blood shed on the earth. Now this is a little puzzling at first glance.

What is the crime? What is the charge that Jesus levies against religion in Israel, the scribes and Pharisees? It's their hypocrisy. It's their outward pretense and their inward uncleanness. Their selfish, self-serving operation.

And yet he says that on them is going to come the righteous blood shed on the earth. Jesus says you are condemned out of your own mouths as sons of those who murdered the prophets. And he equates the guilt associated with this hypocrisy to the guilt of murder, to the guilt of shedding the blood of the prophets.

If this did not already appear to be a serious indictment and a serious charge from the lips of the Son of God, the punishment that is associated with this charge ought to focus our attention on it. It is equated with murder. It is equated with shedding innocent blood, with shedding righteous blood.

Because along with the assassination of the prophets comes the rejection of God's word which they bear. They are messengers, they are prophets, they are preachers. And in the same way that the Lord Jesus Christ came to Israel preaching the gospel of the kingdom, preaching the fulfillment of God's covenant blessings to Israel, who are the people of God, who are believers, the call is not an evangelistic call, it is a call to obedience.

We've seen before the message of John the Baptist. We've seen the extended teaching discourses of Jesus Christ in the plain and on the mount. And these are calls to obedience.

They are calls to righteous living. And we know that righteous living is not a means of salvation. It is its proper fruit.

And this indictment here, again, is not that they don't believe in God, or that they reject God and His plan, or that they care nothing for God. It is that as the people of God they are disobedient. They are self-willed, they are self-centered, self-seeking, hypocritical, having a form of godliness and denying its power.

And this is an indictment for believers who have a charge, who have an obligation, who have a calling, and have not fulfilled it. And the penalty is as great as the penalty for shedding the righteous blood of Abel, or shedding the righteous blood of Zechariah, who was murdered between the temple and the altar. What a crowning symbol of rejection of God's word on the part of believers that a prophet would be murdered in the temple courtyard.

Jesus Christ Himself in the capital city of Jerusalem on the day of Passover is going to be crucified. The Son of God Himself is going to be crucified by religious people who believe that they are serving God and stamping out a heresy. This attitude of heart that Jesus points out and indicts is a historical flaw in the human race that finds one of its first expressions in our passage this morning back in Genesis 4. You will recall that Genesis 4 begins a new page in history after the expulsion from the garden.

Adam knew his wife and she conceived and bore Cain. Eve says, I have gotten a man, the sign of Yahweh. Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel.

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time, or after days, this is a term that is often used for a period of exactly one year in Hebrew. After a year it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord.

He brought a minka, a gift that is supposed to be an expression of gratitude and an expression of honor to the recipient. It was a gift that was given to kings. It was a gift that was brought before God over in Leviticus.

In the bringing of this gift of the fruit of the ground to the Lord by Cain, he brings it for a particular reason. He has a thinking motivation in his heart. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat.

And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but he did not respect Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. There are several concepts here that we want to explore to fully appreciate why this story is here and why it is that God says what he says, why Cain does what he does, and why his punishment is what it is in Genesis chapter 4. You will recall that last time when we reviewed this story, I think many of us have been taught and have heard over the years that the distinction between Cain and Abel in the bringing of this gift is that Cain, by bringing a bloodless sacrifice, by bringing the produce of the field, is failing to picture and to honor the idea of redemption, of blood sacrifice, and so forth.

And I pointed out to you that the language here does not support that conclusion. As a menka, bringing of grain, of the produce of the field, is perfectly legitimate. In fact, this is the common term for that later on in the Levitical code.

And I know that a lot of times when we come to passages and take a view that is off the beaten track, we begin to wonder if we ever are going to be on the beaten track or if we are going to constantly be swimming against the tide. So I thought I would point out that in this particular case, we are well within tradition. I have with me, just to offer you some reassurance, we don't just take an interpretation because it's different.

This is Kyle and Dalich, which is an old and very well respected commentary on the Old Testament. It's based on the Hebrew. The commentary on Genesis was authored by C.F. Kyle.

And in commenting on this passage, he points out, of course, the verse, Jehovah looked upon Abel and his gift, and upon Cain and his gift he did not look, which is a fairly literal rendition from the Hebrew. He goes on to say, The look of Jehovah was in any case a visible sign of satisfaction. It is a common and ancient opinion that fire consumed Abel's sacrifice and thus showed that it was graciously accepted.

While this explanation has the analogy of Leviticus 9.24 and Judges 6.21 in his favor, it does not suit the words, Upon Abel and his gift. Since those two are linked, his point is, if God consumed the sacrifice by fire, Abel would have been consumed as well, because the verb applies to both Abel and his gift. So that's not a likely understanding.

The reason for the different reception of the two offerings was the state of mind toward God with which they were brought, and which manifested itself in the selection of the gifts, not indeed in the fact that Abel brought a bleeding sacrifice and Cain a bloodless one, for this difference arose from the differences in their callings, and each necessarily took his gift from the produce of his own occupation. It was rather in the fact that Abel offered the fattest firstlings of his flock the best that he could bring, whilst Cain only brought a portion of the fruit of the ground, but not the firstfruits. By this choice, Abel brought, which is the Greek or the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew here, and manifested that disposition which is designated faith in Hebrews 11.4, passage we looked at last week.

The nature of this disposition, however, can only be determined from the meaning of the offering itself. The sacrifices offered by Adam's sons, from the free impulse of their nature as determined by God, were the first sacrifices of the human race. And he goes on to describe that.

But the point here is that we are not the first to realize that it was not the fact that one was a bloody and the other a bloodless sacrifice. It is, as the author of Hebrews points out, the attitude with which the sacrifice is brought. And it is manifested and pointed out especially in the terse language of Genesis when a detail is noted, it is highly significant.

It says that Cain brought an offering, a minka, of the fruit of the ground. Abel brought the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And without going into a detailed Hebrew exegesis

here, it doesn't mean that he so much brought the fat of the animals as that these were the firstlings or the firstborn of his flock.

And among the firstborn, these were the choice. These were the fattest and the best of the firstborn. We don't have any record or any indication that there are specific details about offering portions of the sacrifices, offering the fat or the upper hind quarter or any of the things that will be specified later on in the Levitical code.

This simply means that when Abel decided to bring his minka to the Lord, he did this heartily as unto the Lord. He wanted to please God and he brought the very best that he had. It was the firstborn of the flock and it was the choicest, the fat of his flock that he brought.

And this suggests and implies that faith that is explicitly pointed out over in Hebrews 11. Cain, it just says he brought an offering. He didn't apparently make any effort to express the same level of dedication to God and desire to please God that Abel does.

And it's obvious that this is just a gift, not a gift on the order that Abel brings. So, again, it's not... Although you can certainly see significance in the fact that not only is this a worthy sacrifice, a firstborn and the fat of the firstborn sacrifice, it does resonate and it does remind us that here you have a sacrifice that pictures redemption through the shedding of blood. But that's not the reason that one is accepted and the other is not.

It is the attitude of heart. That attitude of heart that Jesus pointed out in Matthew 23 when he talks to the Pharisees about their religious service. You'll recall in another place when Jesus... He points this out on many occasions.

In one particular occasion he says, Go and learn the meaning of this statement. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. This was a puzzling scripture.

I'm sure there was a lot of head scratching for the Pharisees who prided themselves on keeping the letter of the law when Jesus said, Go and learn the meaning of this scripture, this quote from the Old Testament. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. If God doesn't desire sacrifice, why did he legislate it into the law of Moses? Why have they slaughtered these hundreds of thousands of animals over the centuries in Israel if God doesn't desire sacrifice? Jesus points this principle out, that God desires mercy, which is an attitude of heart.

To be merciful, one must be humble. To be truly merciful, you are oriented to grace. You are oriented to the fact that none of us have anything that we ourselves did not receive.

An attitude of mercy implies a lot of things in the soul. Mercy is not a characteristic we associate with religious hypocrisy, with Phariseeism as it came to exist in Israel. And it is not an attitude that we find in the heart of Cain.

In fact, quite the opposite. Because of this, God does not respect Cain and his offering. That is doubly ironic.

If you stop and think about this, we have, as always in the early chapters of Genesis, we have concepts introduced that are firsts. They are archetypes. They are first things.

We noted last time that this anger in the heart of Cain, this is the first time anger is mentioned in the Bible. It's a new thing. Even in the garden, in the face of the fall of Adam and Eve, it doesn't say that God was angry.

But we have here the idea of sacrifice. This is the first occurrence of this in our record of history. But we also have something else.

We have these two brothers who are born. One of them is born first. The other is born afterward.

What is the order of birth between Cain and Abel? Who is the eldest? It's Cain. He is the firstborn. The concept of the firstborn is a very strong theme in Scripture.

We find it mentioned all the way from Genesis to Revelation. It is doubly ironic here that Abel, who is not the firstborn son, he is the second son, understands the concept of firstborn better than Cain. He understands and brings the firstlings, the firstborn, of his flock.

I'd like to pause here and just review the concept, the doctrine, if you will, of the firstborn in Scripture. It is introduced here in Genesis 4. But throughout the ancient Near East, virtually all of the cultures of which we have any records, observed this principle of the firstborn. The firstborn in the ancient Near East enjoyed a position of honor and favor.

You see this in one of many places in Scripture, in Genesis 49, when Jacob is talking about his sons. And if you're up on your Bible knowledge, I started to say Bible trivia, but none of the things in the Bible are really trivial. But do you recall, for example, who was the firstborn son of Jacob? It wasn't Judah.

Obviously it wasn't Joseph, who was the second to last. Benjamin was the last. Who was the firstborn son of Jacob? Who should have inherited the rulership, the priesthood, and many of the things that devolved to the younger sons? It was Reuben.

Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob. In Genesis 49, Jacob called his sons and said, Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days. Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.

Reuben, in verse 3, You are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. The firstborn son was the honored

son. The firstborn son was the favored son and had the right of primogeniture.

Some of the entitlements as a second point under the doctrine of the firstborn, entitlements for the firstborn included the double portion of inheritance. You find this in Deuteronomy chapter 21 and verse 17. By the way, this is not just an academic study for us.

We need to understand the rights and the responsibilities of the firstborn. It is a doctrine that applies to you and applies to me. And we're going to see how before we conclude this morning.

But entitlements included the double portion of inheritance. Deuteronomy chapter 21, verse 17. This is under the category of domestic regulations.

It talks in verse 15, If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and they have born him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son is of her who is unloved, this is the non-favorite wife, the wife that the husband doesn't favor, doesn't care that much about, isn't that proud of, it shall be on the day that he bequeaths his possessions to his sons that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength. Same thing Jacob says over in 49.3 of Genesis.

He is the beginning of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his. You can't play favorites based on origin or which wife.

Of course, you know, this is doubly interesting because the law makes provision for polygamy and cases of polygamy. It doesn't say if a man has two wives, he shall divorce one and get down to only one wife like he's supposed to have. It says in the case where he does have two wives, it doesn't matter which one is his favorite.

The firstborn son is the firstborn son. So he has the double portion of inheritance. He has the right to his father's blessing.

You find this, of course, by example in many places in Scripture. You can see Genesis chapter 27 where the story of Isaac and Jacob and Esau, the whole story in that chapter revolves around who gets Isaac's blessing. It is the right of the firstborn son.

It is Esau's right through primogeniture to receive Isaac's blessing. And this blessing is a thing that can't be given and then withdrawn. Once it's given, it is possessed by the recipient and that can't be reversed.

And you remember that after deceiving his father and receiving that blessing, Jacob leaves and Esau comes in and Esau pleads with his father to give him the blessing that

he believes is his right. And Isaac says, I'm sorry, I have already given that blessing and I can't take it back. I can only give you a different blessing.

And toward the end of the chapter, Isaac in verse 39 of Genesis 27 says to Esau, behold, your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth and of the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother. And it shall come to pass when you become restless that you shall break his yoke from your neck.

So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him. And Esau said in his heart, the days of mourning for my father are at hand. Then I will kill my brother Jacob.

And we have a lot of themes being introduced in Genesis chapter 4 of the tension between brothers, the choices that brothers make and the outcome of that strife that will carry forward throughout the scriptures. But the double portion, the father's blessing, you find this again in Genesis 48 with the blessing of Jacob that we alluded to earlier on each of his sons. But Reuben comes first.

Preferential treatment, Genesis chapter 43. When you have the episode between Joseph in Egypt and his brothers who come down during the famine and all of the brothers come down to dine with Joseph and they're seated according to their order of birth. And one of the things that should have alerted the brothers that Joseph knows something more than a stranger would is that each of the brothers is seated according to his order of birth.

And Reuben is at the head of the table. He's the firstborn son. So the firstborn receives that preferential treatment.

And one of the fascinating things in scripture is that this expectation and this principle which is observed and is encouraged and even legislated in Israel, the reversal of this principle is a consistent theme throughout scripture. Who should be the favored son of Adam? Who should be the blessed son? Who should pick up the mantle of the family priesthood in the family of Adam? It should be Cain. He's the firstborn son.

And this principle is known and understood all the way back in the origin of the human race. Obviously, Abel understands the principle of the firstborn. But the reversal of this is going to be a theme.

And you have Abel and later Seth replacing Cain as the favored son, as the son who carries forward under blessing and who is in a sense the true heir of the father. Think about the number of times this occurs in history. What about the sons of Abraham? Who is the firstborn son of Abraham? It doesn't matter that Hagar may not be the favored wife compared to Sarah.

Ishmael is the firstborn son. And under that principle we saw in the law, Ishmael should be the heir and should be the recipient of the double portion in the preferential

treatment. But who ends up being the true heir? It's Isaac.

How about Jacob and Esau? Esau is the firstborn son. And Jacob, the elder, shall serve the younger. It comes true there.

You have the twelve sons of Jacob by four different wives, four different mothers. And how many of the privileges in Israel does Reuben bear? Who winds up with the priesthood? Levi. Who winds up with the rulership? Judah.

Who winds up with the double portion? Joseph. Joseph himself has two sons. Do you remember their names? Ephraim and Manasseh.

And there's another great story right at the end of Genesis there where Jacob on his deathbed is going to bless the sons of Joseph. And you remember that when he starts to lay his hands on Ephraim and Manasseh, he crosses his arms and he's supposed to put his right hand on the head of the eldest. And instead he crosses his arms and Joseph says, No, father, wait a minute, you're supposed to have your right hand over here on Ephraim.

Ephraim is the eldest son and Manasseh is the younger. And yet he crosses his hands and blesses the younger. This is one you might not think of commonly.

In Moses' family, you've got Aaron and Miriam and Moses. Who's the eldest son in that family? It's Aaron. Aaron is already around and a lad of some years when Moses is born.

But who is the leader? Who is the favored son in that family? It's Moses. Aaron obviously retains the priesthood, but Moses is the prominent brother. You have the family of David.

When Samuel comes in 1 Samuel 17 to anoint the next king of Israel, who is the eldest son of Jesse? Who should have the rulership and the blessing and the double portion? It's Eliab, David's eldest brother. But there are seven sons of Jesse who stand before Samuel and are passed over one by one. And the youngest, who is out in the field with the sheep, receives the anointing, receives the favor of God.

Later on you have David's sons. Who becomes the next king in Israel after David? It's Solomon. Is Solomon the eldest son? Not by a good ways.

You have several of David's sons who don't live long enough to enjoy that right. But even among David's living sons, Adonijah is the elder. And Adonijah is passed over and Solomon is the next king of Israel.

And this carries over in the New Testament. Think about the story of the prodigal son, the parable of the prodigal, which we have studied in the not too distant past, of those sons who live with their father and who divide the inheritance and one son leaves. Which of those is the eldest son? It's the son who remains behind and stays with his father.

The prodigal is the younger of the two sons. But for whom is the fatted calf slain and who gets the ring and the robe and the new sandals and so forth? It's the younger. And which son receives the rebuke of not appreciating his standing and his dwelling with the father? It's the eldest son.

There is a larger sense in which you see a relationship between Israel and the church. Israel is said to be God's firstborn. Look at Exodus chapter 4 verse 22.

Very significant passage. During the plagues in Egypt, after the frogs and the lice and the darkness and the locusts and the other plagues, there is one final plague that takes place. And it's foreshadowed here.

Exodus chapter 4. When Moses returns to Egypt in verse 18, he tells Jethro he's going to go to Egypt. Jethro says, Go in peace. The Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who sought your life are dead.

Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand. Then the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand.

But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my son, my firstborn. So I say to you, Let my son go, that he may serve me.

But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn. We don't always remember that the final plague in Egypt was foretold and foreshadowed in the first words that Moses speaks to the Pharaoh. Pharaoh has an opportunity at the very beginning to recognize God's plan in God's hand.

And of course he does not do so. There is a whole separate study on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart which we have reviewed a few times. And I will just remind you if you haven't thought about it in a while that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart here has nothing to do with Pharaoh's salvation.

It has everything to do with discipline on the land of Egypt and the redemption of God's firstborn child, Israel. But the nation of Israel is said to be here God's firstborn. And not just here but this is reviewed again in Exodus chapter 13 and verse 2 when you do get to the Passover and the redemption of the firstborn in Egypt.

It is pictured by the slaying of the Passover lamb and the marking of the lintels on the door posts with the blood of the Passover lamb. This is redemption of the firstborn. And this later becomes a statute in Israel that everything that opens the womb is to be redeemed.

The firstborn belong to God. But Israel is God's firstborn. So what does that make the church? We are the late comers.

We are the people of God who come later on. However, what does God's firstborn son do with the rights of primogeniture? With the opportunity for blessing and the double portion and so forth that are the firstborn's right? Israel, like Esau, fritters away the privilege. Doesn't understand the value and doesn't seize and lay hold of the privileges of the firstborn.

And it is another of those ironic twists in human history and in the plan of God that the church who is the latter son, so to speak, winds up in union with Christ being the firstborn and enjoying the double portion and the privileges. Although we come later and start out lower in status as Gentiles, as the goyim, who are unclean and thought to be second class and are only tolerated as believers in the nation of Israel, we wind up being elevated through union with Christ to a standing that the believers, the greatest in the Old Testament age, could not attain. So this theme of reversal is based on the idea of firstborn.

And it has its roots beginning here in Genesis chapter 4. And it has implications for us as believers in this age. We are roughly halfway through our study of the firstborn. We're going to pause and take a break.

When we come back, we'll resume.