

SELF-RIGHTEOUS? WHO, ME?

by Laurel Mast

KEY VERSE:

And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer; therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. --Jeremiah 7:13-14

FAITH STORY:

Jeremiah 7:1-15; II Chronicles 36:15-21

FAITH FOCUS:

The people of Judah were doing evil--stealing, lying, murdering, committing adultery, and oppressing the weak. The people were self-righteous because they thought that their sin was okay because they had the temple of the Lord. They had put their security in the temple, but God saw what they were doing and had the prophet Jeremiah go and proclaim to them that if they did not change their ways, God would take away the temple and their land. The people did not listen to Jeremiah and continued to live in self-righteousness. What Jeremiah prophesied came true and Judah fell.

SESSION GOAL:

Help students understand that God calls us to humble ourselves and to put our trust in God.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students should:

- Know why Judah fell
- Recognize a time when they have experienced self-righteousness

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Note cards
- 2 Pens
- 3 Bibles
- 4 Clay or Play-doh
- 5 An assortment of items connected to the Christian life, including a Bible, cross, devotional book, a church bulletin, hymnbook, Christian music CD, books, magazines, your church's pictorial directory, a picture of your church, etc. The more items you can take, the better.
- 6 Ask a male reader to step quietly into the class during the Explore the Bible time, while the student's eyes are closed, and read the words of Jeremiah. Give him the passage to practice reading prior to class.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10 minutes)

Have the items that are connected to the Christian life on display. Hand out note cards and pens and ask students to make a list of ten things they think are important to being a Christian. Say that they may use the items to help them think of ideas but their list does not need to be limited to the things they see. After they have made their lists, ask them to circle the five most important things that a person needs to be a Christian. Then have them put a star by the two most important items. Finally, ask students to choose the one thing from their list that is most important to being a Christian.

Ask: *What did you choose? Why did you choose that one item from all of the rest? What is important about that item? What defines a Christian?*

Depending on the students' answers, lead the discussion to the point that the most important part of being a Christian is having a relationship with Jesus.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Transitional statement: *Today we'll learn about the people of Judah, who, at one point in their history, called themselves followers of God even though they didn't have a true relationship with God. Rather than trusting in God, they trusted in the temple itself.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–20 minutes)

Explain that you would like the students to close their eyes and use their imaginations as you take them back in time—back more than 2600 years ago to the year 608 B.C. Encourage them to imagine how it would feel to be a person in this story:

You are a person who belongs to the tribe of Judah. It's time for the annual celebration of the Festival of Weeks, and you and your family have walked over fifty miles to come and worship in the temple. Your dirty, sweaty feet ache from the days that you have spent walking with your family to Jerusalem. You hear a low rumble of voices and excited shouts from the people milling around in anticipation of arriving at the temple. You smell smoke from campfires that are cooking food...it smells so good...your mouth starts to water and you realize how hungry you are.

You wipe the sweat from your forehead, then rub your lower back, which is screaming to lie down somewhere. But you can't relax now—you must stand with your family just as you have for the past few hours to get into the temple. You turn your head to the right to see how close you are to the gate—you're getting closer, but there still seem to be hundreds of people in front of you. You turn your head around to see the end of the line, but it's impossible. There are thousands of pilgrims who have flocked to the temple for the festival. "Yes," you think to yourself, "I'm just going to have to deal with this back pain for a little longer, but it will be worth it."

Yes, you believe that the pain and the waiting will be worth it because you are among the people of Judah who believe that the most important part of your religion is that you have the temple to worship in.

You think back over the past year since you were at the temple. You remember stealing flour from your neighbor and giving it to your mom to make bread. It wasn't like she needed it—you just stole the flour for the fun of it. You remember another neighbor—his family was starving—and when he tried to steal flour from your family, your father killed him. Your father had some other issues—like he had sex with the woman down the street one day while you and your mom and brothers were at a worship ceremony for Baal. Then there was the time when you and some of your friends decided to beat up the poor orphan kid at the market, and when your mom asked you about the blood on your shirt, you looked her straight in the eye and told her it came from a stray dog that you tried to help when it got hurt.

You see, the sin in your life—or in anybody else's life in your community of Judah— doesn't matter to you because you have the temple of the Lord. You think that's all you need. You've heard about your fellow Israelites, who were very wicked over 70 years ago, and how God punished them because they were so bad. But you're convinced that you aren't bad like they were—because you have the temple. You come to the temple on festivals such as the one you are at now, and believe that it makes you sinless so that you can go back home and just keep on living in sin.

Oh, oh...you're almost to the gate! Yes! You're almost there! But wait, who's that man? Oh yes, that's just the greeter, a servant of the temple, asking everyone if we have been living morally. "Of course we have," you think. "We do have the temple--what can God do to us? We have the temple!"

Wait a second. What is he saying?"

You tilt your head to the right as you hear him say.

(Other reader says this part)

Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

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

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

(Teacher assumes reading now.)

"Oh no, not Shiloh," you nervously think to yourself.. "Shiloh was a great place of worship in the ancient north. It was ruined because the people were doing evil. What?! No, no that won't

happen here—we have the temple of the Lord!”

“Hey you!” you yell loudly out to the man, “What’s your name?”

(Other reader) “Jeremiah!”

“Well, Jeremiah,” you say, “SHUT UP!”

The people around you laugh and you roll your eyes at Jeremiah as he continues talking,

(Other reader) And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.”

Allow for a moment of silence, then tell students they can open their eyes now.

Ask: *What were you thinking during this story? Did you hear anything that seemed strange? What do you think happened to the people of Judah?*

Ask the class to turn to II Chronicles 36:15-21. Read it together.

Cover these points in a mini-lecture about this passage:

- Because the people ended up not listening to Jeremiah or the prophets before him, God allowed the Chaldeans to overtake them.
- King Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, also helped the Chaldeans to tear down the walls of Jerusalem.
- Many people, young and old, men, women, and children were killed.
- Everything in the temple was taken out--pots, shovels, dishes used for incense and all the bronze vessels used in the temple services were taken. Then the temple was burned, along with all of the other great houses in Jerusalem.
- The people who were spared from the mass killings were taken into exile and the poorest were left to work the land as vinedressers and tillers of the soil. That is how Judah fell.
- The people could have obeyed God and lived in the land with the temple, but they chose to keep their trust in the temple.
- A building is not important to God--God’s relationship with people is what’s important.

Ask: *How were the people of Judah self-righteous?*

(They called themselves people of God, yet they had their trust in their temple and not in God. They did not obey him but thought that they were better than other people, especially Israel, because they had the temple so they could continue living in sin.)

What did the people of Judah learn when their temple was ruined? (To trust and obey God)

APPLY: (7–10 minutes)

Ask: *In what ways are Christians today sometimes like the people of Judah? (Allow time for responses before you ask the next question.) Are there times in our lives when we trust in other things besides God? What are some of the “temples” in our lives?*

Hand out the Play-Doh and ask students to make a symbol of a “temple” that they put their trust in and that is more important to them than their relationship with God.

RESPOND: (5–7 minutes)

Ask students to hold their Play-Doh item and think about the role it plays in their life. During that time, have the Other Reader read the following passage:

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

Say: *God calls us to humble ourselves before him. II Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”*

Close the session by asking the students to quietly destroy their clay item while they pray silently to God, asking for forgiveness and for God to be with them as they try to make God more important in their lives than these “temples.”

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

The fall of Judah was caused by the behavior of the people--they were self-righteous. They committed sins such as theft, murder, adultery, worshiping idols, and oppressing the weak, yet they believed that the temple of the Lord covered their sins. “They had come to think that the presence of the temple in Jerusalem was their guarantee of security and continuity.”¹ They had false trust in the temple. They not only believed in the security of the temple but also of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12) and in the Davidic Covenant (II Samuel 7:8ff).

This passage of Jeremiah was probably at the time of the Festival of Weeks in 608 B.C when the people gathered at the temple in Jerusalem. This sermon was given to the people of Judah at the gate of the Lord’s house. At the festival a servant at the temple usually greeted the people, but Jeremiah probably unofficially took the position of being the greeter. The greeter would ask the pilgrims to examine themselves to see if they were living moral lives before they could pass through the gate and enter into the worship. The people, even though they were committing all types of sins, believed that they were living moral lives—they thought nothing of their sin because they had the temple of the Lord. They thought that the temple was important to God, but in reality the building was not important to God--his people were important--and how they lived their lives was important.²

Jeremiah’s plea, direct from God, was asking the people to change their ways or else God would not allow them to have the temple or dwell in the land. He was asking them to eliminate the oppression, respect the innocent and weak, and abandon the pagan religions. He also reminded them of what had happened to Shiloh. Shiloh, located about thirty miles north of Jerusalem, was an ancient northern sanctuary during the time of the Judges and Samuel. It was a very important place where God had been worshipped, but the people were

evil so God ruined it. Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah that if they didn't change their lives, then the same thing that happened to Shiloh would happen to Jerusalem.³

The people did not listen to Jeremiah or the prophets before him and so God allowed the Chaldeans to over take them. The passage in II Chronicles 36 explains what happened. King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, helped tear down the walls to Jerusalem. Many people— young, old, men, women, children-- were killed. Everything in the temple was taken out--pots, shovels, dishes used for incense and all the bronze vessels used in the temple services were taken and the temple was then burned, along with all of the other great houses in Jerusalem. The people who were spared from the killing were taken into exile and the poorest were left to work the land as vinedressers and tillers of the soil.⁴

1 Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Eds., Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 1-25 (Dallas, TX:Word Books, Publisher, 1991) p. 120.

2 Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Eds., Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 1-25 (Dallas, TX:Word Books, Publisher, 1991) p. 120.

3 Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Eds., Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 1-25 (Dallas, TX:Word Books, Publisher, 1991) p.122.

4 II Kings 25:8-2