

Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Lecture 2, Misunderstandings Prophets

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This is Dr. Gary Yates, leading us in a presentation of the book of Jeremiah. In session 2. He will continue the discussion of Jeremiah as an Old Testament prophet. In session two, he will focus on the common misunderstandings in regard to Old Testament prophets.

In our second session on the book of Jeremiah, we're continuing to think about the message of Jeremiah in light of the Old Testament prophets. And again, the prophets are a part of the Bible that many of us are not familiar with. It may be something that we haven't read or studied, or heard many messages about in our churches.

So, in this session, I would like to talk about some common misunderstandings of the prophets and try to correct that and give us a better understanding of a portrait of Jeremiah as a spokesman of God. Remember, in our last session, we talked about three things about the prophets that I think are very important. Number one, they are God's watchmen.

They were announcing the coming judgment. The Lord raised up the writing prophets for a specific crisis that was going on in Israel. Number two, they are messengers of God.

They are not there to speak their words. They are there to speak the words of God. And number three, they are messengers of the covenant.

On the basis of God's warnings and the curses of those covenants, the prophets are announcing judgment. On the basis of the promises of those covenants, the prophets are promising blessings and things that God will do for the people. But again, there are some huge misunderstandings about the prophets that I'd like to try to address in this session.

The first misunderstanding that I often hear people talking about when they address the prophets is that they are often viewed as simply angry messengers of a raging God who is looking forward to destroying people. And maybe we think of a preacher who preaches with a red face and the veins sticking out in his neck and seems to enjoy talking about God's judgment. That's the image that many people have of the prophets.

In many ways, as we're looking at Jeremiah, we are going to see the message of an angry God. I'm reminded working through Jeremiah of Jonathan Edwards, sinners in

the hands of an angry God. That's a summary of what Jeremiah is going to speak about as well.

Jeremiah says in one place, I am filled with the wrath and the indignation of God. And we definitely see that message coming out. There are extreme pictures and images of judgment and the severity of that.

In Jeremiah chapter 9, verse 21, there is a picture of death climbing through the windows to take the lives of the people of Judah. And then the mourning and the grief that's going to take place as a result of that. Jeremiah is going to portray Judah as God's unfaithful wife.

And we'll look at that in one of our later sessions. In chapter 13, verses 26 and 27, the Lord says that he's going to strip her naked and expose her shame to all of the nations. We read that, and we're jarred by the imagery.

Jeremiah chapter 12 verse 13 makes reference to the fierce anger of the Lord. And Jeremiah 23 20 says that the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he's accomplished all that he designed and he intended. So, were the prophets angry messengers of judgment? Absolutely.

But the other side of the prophets that we need to understand is that some of the most heartfelt expressions and passionate expressions of God's love and mercy and compassion are also found in the prophets. Brent Sandy, in his book *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, says that in the prophets, we have God's love and God's wrath presented to us at the extremes. And so, we see the most extreme expressions of God's anger, but along with that, we also see some of the most beautiful pictures of God's love.

I think of Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 2, where the Lord says, I have loved you with an everlasting love. And just the reminder that comes out of that for Israel and for us as well, there is nothing that could have caused God to love his people less. There is nothing that could have caused his people to love or could have caused God to love his people more because he loves them with everlasting love.

And in spite of the fact that his fierce anger will not turn back, that love is still there. Hosea 11 verses 8 and 9, as the Lord is preparing to judge Israel, he says, how can I give you up, O Ephraim? Because the Lord loves these people. And so, he says, as a result of that, I will not fully execute all of my anger because I love you, and I can't turn back from that.

In Isaiah 40, as God promises to bring the people back from exile, he pictures himself as a shepherd who is carrying his sheep in his arms tenderly and affectionately and making sure that they are going to be absolutely safe in this entire process. That's

what God is going to do. The Lord says in Ezekiel chapter 33, verse 11, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

That's why the Lord sent the prophets as watchmen in the first place. If God's desire was only to destroy the people, then he could have done that. But he sent the prophets in advance of the judgment so that the people might have a chance to repent.

He did that as an expression of love. In the book of Amos, God delays the judgment so that the people can hear the warnings ahead of time. And there was always the possibility that if the people responded, if the people would listen, if the people would obey and change their ways, God would relent from sending the judgment.

The problem is that in the book of Jeremiah, as Jeremiah is preaching this message, the only thing that he's going to encounter is defiant rebellion. And the people will say in chapter 8, we are not able, we will not return. Chapter 44, we will continue performing our pagan rites.

But the prophets give us numerous expressions of just God's amazing love for his people. One of my favorite ones is found in Isaiah chapter 49, verses 14 and following. And here's what the people of Israel said.

Zion said, the Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me. As they were thinking about the exile and they were defeated by the Babylonians, they were taken away and sent out of the land. Their response was that God's forgotten about us.

God doesn't care about us. Maybe even the feeling God really can't do anything about this. The gods of Babylon are stronger than the Lord.

The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me. Listen to what God says to his people in response to that. In verse 15, can a woman forget her nursing child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? He says, do you think that it's possible for me to stop loving my people? Well, could a woman stop loving the baby, the infant that she nurses at her breast? And then the Lord says, even if that could happen, and we can't even imagine that at a human level, the Lord says, yet I will not forget you.

He then goes on to say to Zion, and he says I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. And so, the Lord, in a sense, has a tattoo of his people, and he has Zion on one hand; he has an image of the city. And so, the first thing that God always sees, the first image that God is always aware of his people, he never forgets them.

They're never out of his mind. They're never out of his consciousness. And so, the prophets, yes, they are messengers of an angry God, but they also remind us of God's incredible love.

They are precursors that help us to understand what Paul says in Romans chapter eight, there is nothing that could ever separate us from the love of God. We see the extremes of God's anger and God's love. And both of those things are part of the message of the prophets.

I think a second misunderstanding about the prophets is that the prophets were simply predictors of the future. We might even think of them as crystal ball gazers who are looking off into the future and their role and their goal and their mission, their message was all about telling us what things were going to be like in the last days. As a sports fan, I think of the prophets as people who could accurately predict every game and the outcome in this situation ahead of time.

And it's important to understand the prophets were predictors of the future. They were not right 66% of the time. They were not right 50% of the time.

They were not right 95% of the time. Deuteronomy 18 says that if the Lord sends a prophet and if he makes predictions, the only way to know that he's a true prophet, he's right 100% of the time because God is always right. He never lies.

He never tells something that's untruthful. And so, a true prophet of God, as he prophesied the future, always was right. But it's also important to understand that predicting the future was not the primary message or the role of the prophets.

Someone has said that two-thirds of the preaching of the prophets was foretelling. One-third of the preaching of the prophets is foretelling. What we mean by that is foretelling is simply preaching, communicating the message of God, telling forth God's word, and preaching to the people.

And that's two-thirds of the message of the prophets. And I believe that one of the reasons that we need the prophets in the churches today is that they were preaching to the needs, the concerns, the problems, the people's relationship with God at that time. And as you get to know the prophets, you understand they were dealing with the same issues, the same problems that we're dealing with in our lives.

Two-thirds of the prophets' preaching deals with those kinds of issues—just talking to the people about their sin, their need to love God, and their need for faith in God. And then one-third of their preaching is foretelling or predicting the future.

Now, most of those predictions, as we go back, Jeremiah lived more than 500 years before the time of Jesus. Most of those predictions and those events deal with things

that happened in past history. In fact, many of them deal with things that are going to happen in the immediate future before we ever get to the New Testament and to the time of Jesus.

Fee and Stewart in their book, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, give us these statistics. They say that as we look at the prophets, less than 2% of their prophecies are messianic prophecy. Less than 5% of their prophecies deal with the new covenant era and less than 1% of their prophecies deal with events that are still future.

And so many people approach the prophets or they think about the prophets simply in terms of eschatology or simply in terms of, we want to go to these books and find a roadmap for the future. There is very little in the prophets. They do have important things to say.

God's kingdom is going to come. God's Messiah is going to rule and reign. God is going to keep and fulfill his promises, but they are more designed to give us a general picture of what that future is like, not to answer all of our questions, not to solve all of the eschatological puzzles and mysteries that are out there.

And so, if we go to the prophets looking for those kinds of answers, we're really looking to them for things that were not the primary focus of their ministry. Many people think that the primary issue in the prophets is whether you are premillennial, amillennial, postmillennial, pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib. There are things that relate to those issues, but that's not going to be the primary thing that we talk about and discuss as we study through them.

When I often tell people that I teach at a seminary and I teach the Old Testament prophets, that often raises many questions. And some of those questions are things like, who do you believe the Antichrist is? Or do you believe that Jesus is coming back in the near future? Are we living in the last days after the 9-11 events? Was 9-11 prophesied in the Bible? Is there anything about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is there anything in the Bible about that? And often many people take their Bible, and especially they take the prophets, and they go looking for things that are in today's newspaper. And as you study the history of the Christian church, you realize that people have been doing this for all of history, and they've made some huge mistakes in doing so.

The mistakes are not in the Bible. The mistakes are in the ways that we deal with them. And so, I believe there are things here that do inform our understanding of the future.

Jeremiah gives me great hope that God is in control and that God's kingdom is going to come. Isaiah, that the Lord is going to restore his kingdom and Zion is going to be

lifted up as the highest of the mountains. But many of the specific things that we want to know, who is the Antichrist? What's the future of the United States? What's going on in the conflict between the West and radical Islam? What's going to happen to the nation of Israel, which was established in 1948? The prophets simply do not always address those issues.

We have to look at their predictions in terms of the things that were going on in their day and in their circumstances. And so, we simply don't go to Jeremiah and pull out verses from Jeremiah and relate them to the great tribulation in the end times. We don't turn back to the book of Isaiah the way that some popular studies have done recently and say this is about God's judgment on America.

The prophets are talking about God's judgment on Israel and Judah, and they're dealing with specific things that were going to happen in their time and in their context. So, if we go looking for those kinds of answers in the prophets, I think ultimately, either one, we're going to be disappointed, or two, we're going to end up misrepresenting and misinterpreting the message of the prophets. And to be honest, as I look at many of the ways that the prophets are treated in the popular Christian culture, I think we see those kinds of things going on.

There's a third misunderstanding, and this is really what I want the focus of our lesson to be today. The third misunderstanding is that many people believe the prophets were God's messengers to the people in the Old Testament under the Old Covenant. Therefore, their message isn't really relevant to us today.

The prophets came hundreds of years before Jesus. They prophesied about the things that the reality that they were prophesying has already happened. So, how could their message be relevant to us today? Well, what I'd like us to understand is that instead of thinking about eschatology and our eschatological positions, the prophets primarily ask us to focus on some very important life issues and things that relate to our relationship with God and to our mission as the church today.

One passage that's constantly reminded me of this is looking over at the book of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 5. And Isaiah describes the culture of Israel and Judah in the eighth century BC. And when I read that passage in many ways, I understand that he's addressing a culture that, with all of its differences and with all of the time gap that's there, it's a culture that's very much like where we are today. He talks about people who add field to field and are consumed with wealth and possessions.

He talks about people who are consumed by pleasure and they drink wine by the bowlfuls and they're concerned with just alcohol and satisfying their pleasures. That's our culture today in many ways. He talks about people that are overwhelmed by moral confusion and he says they are people who call good evil and evil good.

And when I watch any television news show or radio call-in show, and people address issues like abortion or homosexuality, I realize we're living in that kind of culture. Woe to those who call good evil and evil good. When we abandon scripture, we lose our moral center, and that's what happened to those people as well.

Isaiah also describes a people who are arrogant and who defy God, and they say, hey look Isaiah, if you're going to talk about God's judgment coming on us, let him hurry, let him hasten, let him speed and bring that judgment on. And Isaiah says the Lord is going to hasten. And the Assyrians are going to come quickly, and when they mete out God's judgment, it's going to happen very quickly.

So, the culture that the prophets were dealing with—yeah, there's a huge time gap—is very much like ours. As I study the prophets, I study Jeremiah and look at Jeremiah in light of the whole corpus of prophetic literature. There are three major life issues that the prophets specifically address. The first one is that the prophets are going to talk about the problem of idolatry.

And the people have, instead of worshiping God, they have turned away to the worship of other gods. And particularly for Israel, the worship of the Canaanite gods, of Baal, of the female fertility goddesses, and all the rites and the rituals, that was something that went on throughout Israel's history. That was something that was particularly prominent in the days of Jeremiah.

And so, I'd like to look at just a handful of passages that begin to prepare us to understand Jeremiah, where he's going to address this issue of idolatry. One of my favorite ones is in Jeremiah chapter 2, verse 13, where Jeremiah is going to use a powerful image. He says this he says, My people have committed two evils.

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that could hold no water. Now, in the world that Jeremiah lived in, cisterns were very important because rainwater and water were precious in Israel. And the cisterns were designed to hold that water.

Jeremiah compares the idols that the people have turned to as broken cisterns. The things that they need for life are going to leak out. And an idol is really anything that we trust in for significance and security other than God himself.

And the Lord is the fountain of life. He's where you find the living water. Jesus talked about that in John 4 and John 7, but the people had chosen to worship gods that would ultimately be cracked cisterns.

They would look to them for security and significance and blessing. And those gods would ultimately not produce for them. Jeremiah says the people of Judah have as many idols as they have cities, and none of those idols are going to help them.

And in really many ways, the radical idolatry of the people of Judah was absolutely something that God could not grasp himself. What other nation, Jeremiah 2.11, has ever abandoned its gods? Well, Israel knows the true God, and they've abandoned him. Does a bride forget her engagement ring and her ornaments of her wedding? No, but my people have forgotten me.

And so right up front in Jeremiah chapter 2, one of the first important chapters in the book, the Lord's going to address the issue of idolatry. We see the depths of this idolatry, the depravity that it brought about, and the pagan rituals that were part of that are addressed in Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 30 to 36. The Lord says this, for the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord.

They have set their detestable things in the house that has called my name to defile it. They put these idols in the temple. They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

And so, the Lord says, they've not only worshipped other gods, they've brought images into the temple. They have set up shrines in the valley of Hinnom, which was right outside of Jerusalem. And they have put up sacred sites to these pagan gods that actually involved, and the rituals that were associated with the worship of these gods actually involved the sacrifice of children.

That's how depraved Israel had become. We read in the historical books that there were kings like Ahaz and Manasseh who actually sacrificed their own children. Any society that would treat children in this way is deplorable in the eyes of God.

And so that's what had happened to them as idol worshippers. That's how much this had crept into their society. Jeremiah chapter 10, Jeremiah deals with their idolatry more in a sarcastic way.

And he makes this statement about idols in chapter 10, verse 5. He says the idols that my people worship are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak, and they have to be carried for they cannot walk. So, how many of us would want to bow down to a scarecrow in a cucumber field? That's what the idols of Israel had become.

And so, the fact of idolatry, the problem of idolatry, the issue of idolatry, very much throughout the entire book of Jeremiah. In fact, as we come to the last message that Jeremiah ever preaches in the book of Jeremiah, his final public sermon in Jeremiah chapter 44, Jeremiah is in Egypt, and he's confronting the refugees that are in Egypt with their pagan practices. And he tells them they need to put those things away, that the Lord is displeased by that.

Here's the response that the people have. They say this: as for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. Now, I've preached many sermons, and people have often not listened to me.

They very rarely tell me that that's what they're going to do when they leave after they shake my hand. But that's what they said to Jeremiah. And then they say this: we will do everything that we have vowed.

We will make offerings to the queen of heaven, the fertility gods of Mesopotamia and Canaan. We will pour out our drink offerings to her as we did both we and our fathers, our kings, and our officials. We're not going to stop worshiping idols.

And so, the book of Jeremiah comes to a stopping point where the Lord has punished them for their idolatry. He sent the judgment of exile, but they still haven't learned. And at the end of the book, they're saying, we're still going to worship our idols.

Their understanding of the covenant and of the reality of these gods had become so skewed that they say, you know, the reason that all of these disasters have happened to us is Josiah carried out these reforms that took away our gods and our pagan practices. And that's why we've experienced all of these bad things. So, idolatry is a major issue in the book of Jeremiah and in the prophets in general.

Now, we said that these are major life issues that are related to us, but I have to be honest that as I read the Old Testament, many times when I hear about the sin of idolatry among the people of Israel, I ask the question, how could these people have been so foolish? I'm really glad that I'm informed in ways that they aren't because I don't have this problem with idols. And I've tended to read these prohibitions about idolatry or these condemnations about idolatry and say, you know, there's a lot of sins in the Bible that I have to deal with. But idolatry is pretty much one of those things that I've checked off my list.

I don't believe in the worship of false gods. Other than the 50-inch television in my living room, I don't have images that I bow down to that often. But as I've come to see what the prophets and the Old Testament really say about idolatry, this is the key life issue that I constantly have to deal with in my life.

It's the key issue that all of us, I think, deal with as followers of Jesus. A couple of passages have helped me understand this. In Colossians chapter three, verse five, Paul says that covetousness or greed is idolatry.

So, you may not have images that you may not give your loyalty and pray your prayers to gods other than the God of the Bible. But if you have a problem with

covetousness, then you're an idol worshiper. Calvin said that the human heart is an idol factory.

And in our culture, the primary idol that we worship is wealth and possessions. And so there was an idol problem in Jerusalem in the seventh century, in the sixth century, as Jeremiah was ministering. We still have a problem with idols today.

The primary reason that Baal, the god of the Canaanites, was such a constant attraction to the people of Israel is that the culture around Israel taught that Baal was the god of the storm. He was the god who brought the rains and blessed them and their crops, brought fertility. The goddesses associated with them would enable their wives to bear children.

In other words, these gods promised prosperity without the moral requirements that God had placed on his people. That was a huge attraction. And so, in our society, as we think of materialism, as we think of wealth, as we think of possessions, we need to see beyond those as just being material things.

There is a spiritual issue associated with that because wealth and possessions become an idol. When we look to them as our source of security and significance, and we give love, devotion, and worship to those things that belong only to God, we definitely have this same issue in our society. Job 31, when Job is protesting his innocence before God, he gives a long list of sins that he's not committed.

He says that he has not trusted in gold or his wealth. He equates that with the pagan rites of kissing toward the sun and the moon or bowing toward the gods. In other words, loving wealth and possessions is just as pagan as bowing down to an image.

The Old Testament helps us to also see that idolatry is essentially when we give in to the lies of the culture. All around the people of Israel, they had the truth. The people of Israel, they knew the true God.

But all around them, there was a culture that had another story. And it was the story of Baal and the Canaanite gods and how those gods could provide security and wealth, blessing, joy, and happiness in life that the Israelites were looking for.

The Israelites gave in to idolatry when they bought the alternative story. And as a Christian, I often find myself buying the alternative story of our culture. That pleasure or wealth or possessions or success or wealth or career, any of those things.

When we believe those lies, we're giving in to the same kind of idolatry that the people of Israel did. Another passage that's helped me with this is Ezekiel chapter 14. When the prophet Ezekiel comes to confront the people of Judah with their idolatry,

he doesn't simply say, you have a problem because you've built and constructed and bowed down to these idols.

He says the real issue is you have built these idols, and you have put these images in your heart. And so, I may not have a physical image or an alternative religious system that I give my loyalty to, but anything in my heart that takes away from my absolute love, devotion, and service to God becomes an idol. And so, the Old Testament prophets, the life issue that they are addressing with the people again and again was an issue of idolatry.

And it's relevant to us today as well. There's a second major life issue in the prophets, and it's the issue of social injustice. And again, it was, I think, a direct corollary of their greed and idolatry.

When you worship and love money, you become desperate enough to get it in any way that you can. Ultimately, if that meant ripping off your neighbors, mistreating them, or not living up to the covenant commands that God had given to you, then that was part of the problem. It was also related to their idolatry.

When Israel worshiped the true God, who was a God of compassion, a God who considered those who were living in slavery in Egypt and delivered them out of their bondage, when you worship that kind of God, it developed a certain attitude toward the poor and the needy. When you worship the gods of Canaan, who established their power by violence, by killing, by abusing others, by taking what they want, in many ways, the Canaanite gods are just human beings writ large with all of their problems, their lust, their sins. When you worship those kinds of gods, it justifies you doing those same things in the human realm.

And so, the prophets talk a great deal about the fact that Israel was not living out its covenant responsibilities to care for the poor and the needy. They had become wrapped up in their own greed. That was an absolute contrast to the kind of society that God had designed Israel to be.

The kings of Israel and Judah had contributed to this by taking land from the people and subsuming everything under their power and their wealth, and all of this was going on. When the prophets first came on the scene in the 8th century, Israel experienced some of the greatest prosperity they ever enjoyed. And all of that has ended up in a society where people do not care for each other and where they are not treating each other in the way that God has designed.

Deuteronomy 15, the Lord says, the poor will always be among you. And that's the reality. But in Deuteronomy 15, verse 11, I've given you these laws so that there will be no poor among you.

That was the ideal. God knew that there was always going to be poor people. There was always going to be inequities.

But the Lord wanted Israel to be a society where those kinds of things did not happen. And so, the Old Testament law gives us laws like this. In Exodus 22, if you give a loan to your neighbor and he has to give his cloak to you as a pledge that he will pay it back, make sure that every night you return his cloak to him.

So that he doesn't get cold as he's sleeping at night. Deuteronomy chapter 15, verse 1, cancels the debts that are in the land every seven years. And I know many of my students who have taken student loans would like to see that practice today.

Deuteronomy 23, don't charge interest on loans that you give to your fellow Israelites. Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy chapter 24 allow the poor people to come into your fields and to glean in the corners and to take the excess because you don't need them all. Deuteronomy chapter 15, you are to release your slaves, the Hebrew debt servants, every seven years.

And when we come to Jeremiah chapter 34 and 35, we're going to learn that the people of Judah had not been living by that commandment. Deuteronomy 24, don't take advantage of the poor and the needy. Deuteronomy 10 verses 18, look after the widows and orphans.

Leviticus chapter 25, if your poor relative is in need, buy him out of debt or restore his property that he's had to sell. Leviticus 25 also says there's a year of Jubilee every 50 years where everything returns to its original owner and every debt is canceled. That is part of the ethic of the Old Testament.

David Baker, in his book *Tight Fist or Open Hands*, reminds us of how the Old Testament law is not just another ancient Near Eastern law code. In many ways, these concerns for the poor and the needy were specially emphasized in Israel. And even if they were not absolutely unique, there were provisions in the law that God gave through Moses that makes it completely distinct from anything else that's in the culture of the Old Testament.

The prophets are calling the people back to that kind of ethical responsibility. So again, to go along with the message of Jeremiah, let me just highlight some of the passages where we see this. Isaiah chapter 5, verses 8 to 10, I've already mentioned this passage earlier in the lesson.

Woe to those who join house to house and field to field until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of Hosts is sworn in my hearing. Surely, many houses will be made desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitants.

For 10 acres of a vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a hummer of seed shall yield but an ephah. They had taken advantage of the poor. They had used debts and loans in many ways to acquire the lands of those who were in need.

And God says I'm going to take away those lands that you've stolen from others. Amos chapter 2 says that the wicked in the land sell the poor for a pair of sandals. A father and his son commit sexual immorality with the same slave girl.

They lie down on the cloak that they have taken from their neighbor as they come into the house of God to worship him. Remember the passage in Exodus that said they were to return that? They were worshiping God with stolen goods. In Jeremiah chapter 7, in Jeremiah's famous temple sermon, Jeremiah reminds the people, look, if you want to live in the land, if you want to enjoy the blessings of the covenant, then you need to fulfill your responsibilities to your neighbors.

Jeremiah actually takes the Ten Commandments, and he flips them. He talks about the second half of the commandments first and the first half of the commandments second in order to stress the importance of social justice. One of my favorite images in the prophets is in Micah chapter 3. Micah says the wicked, the wealthy, the leaders of Judah have become like those who take their people, and they chop them up in a pot, and they cook them, and they eat them for dinner.

Obviously, Judah was not practicing cannibalism, but what the Lord was saying by doing these things where you extort from the poor, you take their land, you steal their livelihood, you deprive them of enjoying the things that God had given to them, their heritage, you have become just as bad as cannibals. As a result of that, the people could not come into the presence of God and worship him and pretend to love him and sacrifice and do all of these things while they were mistreating the poor. In the Christian church today and in American evangelicalism, we are becoming more and more aware of the fact that our gospel ministry also includes a social ministry.

There's been a history where conservative evangelicalism has not wanted to associate with the social gospel. As a result, we've often forgotten about the responsibilities that God has given to us as part of not just a subsidiary ministry of the church, but our calling is to take care of the poor and the needy, to meet people's physical needs as part of our ministry of the gospel. I'm thankful that we're being reawakened to that.

David Platt's book, *Radical*, has reminded us of those responsibilities. The problem is, is that in many ways, I believe the reason the church has neglected these responsibilities is that we've neglected the prophets. And if we were teaching the Mosaic law in our churches, if we were preaching the Old Testament prophets to our

children, we wouldn't forget about these responsibilities because they're absolutely central to what we do as God's people.

They never take the place of gospel ministry, and they don't substitute for bad theology, but they're part of our mission and our calling in the church. Remember that passage in Deuteronomy 15? God's design for Israel was that there was to be no poor among the people of God. Now, if you think that that is simply Old Testament or that's simply for Israel, I want to remind you of a picture that God gives us of the early church in Acts chapter 4. It says that those who had more than they needed sold what they had and gave it to those who were in need.

There were no poor among the people in the early church. I have to feel that Luke, in that passage, is alluding back to Deuteronomy chapter 15 and the people that Israel had failed to be and had failed to become in this new Israel that God was establishing. The Lord was enabling that to become a reality.

In our churches and in our communities, the Lord wants us to be a new representation of a new Israel as well. Israel was a paradigm of what God's people were supposed to look like. There will be no poor among you.

They were fulfilling that in the early church because they understood that part of their responsibility. There's a third and final, and really it's a related life issue. The third issue that the Israelites are going to deal with is the problem of false worship, the problem of false worship.

And in many ways, in our churches today, many of the battles that Christians have with each other are over issues of worship. And many times, it's about preaching style, what our sanctuary should look like, music, and the style of worship. Those are really external issues.

The prophets are going to deal more with the specific heart of worship. The issue that the prophets are going to bring again and again is that the rituals and the sacrifices and the music and the prayers that the people of God were offering to the Lord were unacceptable to him. The reason that they were unacceptable was not simply they were just going through the motions, it had just become a ritual.

The reason they were unacceptable is that there was not a lifestyle behind the practices and the rituals. And so often throughout the prophets, they're going to address the issue, the Lord is not pleased by the sacrifices that you're offering. The Lord is not as interested in the rituals that you go through.

He's more interested in an obedient lifestyle to go along with that worship. In contrast to the gods of the ancient Near East, the prophets remind us the God of Israel could not be manipulated by rituals and sacrifices. Often in these ancient Near

Eastern religions, when a catastrophe would happen, they would try to go to the temple or to the priest and find out what they did we do to offend the gods. And maybe if we offer the gods more meat or more beer or more wine, they'll be happy with us.

But what the prophets are going to say is God cannot be manipulated by rituals and sacrifices. You can't go to the temple on the cloak of the garment that you've taken from your neighbor as a pledge in violation of the law and offer God sacrifices and prayers. In Isaiah 1, the prophet Isaiah says, you lift up your hands in prayer to God, but your hands are covered with blood.

And the Lord says, stop the useless bringing of sacrifices and trampling of my courts. I don't even want to listen to your prayers anymore because I don't hear your words. I see your hands.

Micah chapter 6 is one of the great passages in the prophets. What does God want from us as his people? Should we bring him lavish sacrifices, rivers of oil, hundreds and thousands of animals? Is that what pleases God? The answer is no. Should we bring him our firstborn child and maybe make the supreme sacrifice that many of these pagan worshipers? That's not what God wants, either.

God desires from his people that they do justice. They love mercy. They walk humbly before God.

The prophet Amos says, I hate your music. I hate your sacrifices. I hate your rituals.

Let justice flow like a river. And Jeremiah is going to address this issue in chapter 7 verses 21 to 23 and we'll come back to that passage. But the Lord says, comparatively speaking, when I gave you the law, the primary focus wasn't the commands about rituals and sacrifices.

It was about obedience. And when you offer your burnt offerings, you might as well eat the meat because your offerings are useless. The prophets were not opposed to the rituals.

There was an earlier understanding of the prophets that they were beginners in ethical monotheism and that they repudiated all the rituals. The prophets emphasized the rituals as well, that they were part of obedience to God. God had established these sacrifices.

God had established these practices, but the practices apart from a lifestyle were not what God desired. And so, as we look at the message of the prophets, these three things are going to coalesce together. There's an emphasis on idolatry and the

problem of looking to anything other than God as our ultimate source of security or devotion.

There's a problem of social justice and how the people were not living out their responsibilities, not just to God, but to each other. And then there's an issue of false worship, coming to God without the right kind of heart and the right kind of lifestyle. And so, as we think about worship in light of the prophets, it's not just an issue.

What kind of music do we play? What's your liturgy like? What's your ritual like? The question that the prophets will ask us is, what's your life like? And is your heart in line with what God desires? Do you love God with all of your heart? Or are you, in some way, your commitment to him being corrupted by a desire and a love for idols? John says, keep your heart from idols. And we're going to be reminded of that as well as we look through the prophets and as we study the book of Jeremiah together. This is Dr. Gary Yates leading us in a presentation of the book of Jeremiah.

This is Dr. Gary Yates, leading us in a presentation of the book of Jeremiah. In session 2. He will continue the discussion of Jeremiah as an Old Testament prophet. In session two, he will focus on the common misunderstandings in regard to Old Testament prophets.