

J.C. Ryle:

"Now as he drew near, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation. Then he went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, It is written, My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves." (Luke 19.41-45)

We learn, firstly, how great is the tenderness and compassion of Christ toward sinners. We are told that when he came near Jerusalem for the last time, "He beheld the city and wept over it." He knew well the character of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Their cruelty, their self-righteousness, their stubbornness, their obstinate prejudice against the truth, their pride of heart were not hidden from him. He knew well what they were going to do to himself within a very few days. His unjust judgment, his delivery to the Gentiles, his suffering, his crucifixion, were all spread out distinctly before his mind's eye. And yet knowing all this, our Lord pities Jerusalem! "He beheld the city and wept over it."

We err greatly if we suppose that Christ cares for none but his own believing people. He cares for all. His heart is wide enough to take an interest in all mankind. His compassion extends to every man, woman, and child on earth. He has a love of general pity for the man who is going on still in wickedness, as well as a love of special affection for the sheep who hear his voice and follow him. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Hardened sinners are fond of making excuses for their conduct. But they will never be able to say that Christ was not merciful, and was not ready to save.

We know but little of true Christianity if we do not feel a deep concern about the souls of unconverted people. A lazy indifference about the spiritual state of others may doubtless save us much trouble. To care nothing whether our neighbors are going to heaven or hell is no doubt the way of the world. But a man of this spirit is very unlike David who said, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes because men keep not thy law." He is very unlike Paul who said, "I have great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart for my brethren." Above all, he is very unlike Christ. If Christ felt tenderly about wicked people, the disciples of Christ ought to feel likewise.

We learn, secondly, from these verses, that there is a religious ignorance which is sinful and blameworthy. We read that our Lord denounced judgments on Jerusalem, "because she knew not the time of her visitation." She might have known that the times of Messiah had fully come, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. But she would not know. Her rulers were willfully ignorant. They would not calmly examine evidences and impartially consider great plain facts. Her people would not see "the signs of the times." Therefore judgment was soon to come upon Jerusalem to the uttermost. Her willful ignorance left her without excuse.

The principle laid down by our Lord in this place is deeply important. It contradicts an opinion which is very common in the world. It teaches distinctly that all ignorance is not excusable, and that when men might know truth but refuse to know it, their guilt is very great in the sight of God. There is a degree of knowledge for which all are responsible, and if from indolence or prejudice we do not attain that knowledge, the lack of it will ruin our souls.

Let us impress this great principle deeply on our own hearts. Let us urge it diligently on others when we speak to them about religion. Let us not flatter ourselves that ignorance will excuse everyone who dies in ignorance and that he will be pardoned because he knew no better. Did he live up to the light he had? Did he use every means for attaining knowledge? Did he honestly employ every help within his reach and search industriously after wisdom? These are grave questions. If a man cannot answer them, he will certainly be condemned in the judgment day. A willful ignorance will never be allowed as a plea in a man's favor. On the contrary, it will rather add to his guilt.

We learn, thirdly, from these verses, that God is sometimes pleased to give men special opportunities and invitations. We are told by our Lord that Jerusalem "knew not the day of her visitation." Jerusalem had a special season of mercy and privilege. The Son of God himself visited her. The mightiest miracles that man had ever seen were wrought around her. The most wonderful preaching that ever was heard was preached within her walls. The days of our Lord's ministry were days of the clearest calls to repentance and faith that any city ever received. They were calls so marked, peculiar, and unlike any previous calls Jerusalem had received that it seemed impossible they should be disregarded. But they were disregarded! And our Lord declares that this

disregard was one of Jerusalem's principle sins.

The subject before us is a deep and mysterious one. It requires careful stating and delicate handling lest we should make one scripture contradict another. There seems no doubt that churches, nations, and even individuals are sometimes visited with special manifestations of God's presence and that their neglect of such manifestations is the turning point in their spiritual ruin. Why this should take place in some cases and not in others we cannot tell. Fact, plain facts in history and biography, appear to prove that it is so. The last day will probably show the world that there were seasons in the lives of many who died in sin when God drew very near to them, when conscience was peculiarly alive, when there seemed but a step between them and salvation. Those seasons will probably prove to have been what our Lord calls their "day of visitation." The neglect of such seasons will probably be at last one of the heaviest charges against their souls.

Deep as the subject is, it should teach men one practical lesson. That lesson is the immense importance of not quenching convictions and the workings of conscience. He that resists the voice of conscience may be throwing away his last chance of salvation. That warning voice may be God's "day of visitation." The neglect of it may fill up the measure of a man's iniquity and provoke God to let him alone forever.

We learn, lastly, from these verses, how much Christ disapproves of the profanation of holy things. We read that he cast the buyers and sellers out of the temple and told them that they had made God's house "a den of thieves." He knew how formal and ignorant the ministers of the temple were. He knew how soon the temple and its services were to be destroyed, the veil to be rent, and the priesthood to be ended. But he would have us know that a reverence is due to every place where God is worshiped. The reverence he claimed for the temple was not for the temple as the house of sacrifice, but as "the house of prayer."

Let us remember this conduct and language of our Lord whenever we go to a place of public worship. Christian churches no doubt are not like the Jewish temples. They have neither altars, priesthood, sacrifices, nor symbolic furniture. But they are places where God's word is read, where Christ is present, and where the Holy Ghost works on souls. These facts ought to make us grave, reverent, solemn and decorous, wherever we enter them. The man who behaves as carelessly in a church as he would in an inn or private dwelling has yet much to learn. He has not the "mind of Christ."