

Text: Matthew 23:13-39

Title: Woes to Scribes and Pharisees

Truth: Real religion consists of repentant faith, moral purity, and leading people toward God.

Date/Location: September 18, 21 and 25, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

We continue the section numbering from the last message.

The Lord is foreclosing the offer of the kingdom to the nation. The eight “woes” pronounced by the Lord show that judgment is impending.

This text is directed immediately at the nation of Israel in this historical context. Is it applicable to modern-day readers? All Scripture is relevant to the modern-day reader somehow. It is our job to read and think to see exactly how it can legitimately apply. In this case, the text will mention things that are very displeasing to God. They are still displeasing today, so if we find those attributes in our lives, we need to confess them to the Lord and repent.

II. To the Pharisees: Judgment Woes Pronounced,

23:13-36

A. Woe #1, 23:13: They Close the Door of the Kingdom of God

1. Each woe except the fourth starts with the same phrase, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” The religious leaders are the target, and their hypocrisy is the reason. A hypocrite is an actor, pretender, dissembler, role-player. They are frauds,

fakes, impostors. They pretend to have a righteousness, but it is not from God, nor pleasing to God. It is sinful.

2. The short statement of the reason for judgment is that they shut the doors of the kingdom of heaven so that people cannot enter it. The next phrases explain how.
3. First, the scribes and Pharisees do not go into the kingdom themselves. How is that? We know it is so because they refuse to repent at the message of the King—Jesus. They did not believe His forerunner, John the Baptist. They have their own system of self-righteousness that they think will sweep them into God’s presence, but it will do no such thing. See Romans 10:3 and following verses which speak of the righteousness which is by faith in Christ, not by the works of the law.
4. Second, the scribes and Pharisees disallow other people to go into the kingdom. They do this by not teaching the right way—repentant faith. They teach works-righteousness, and this is exactly the *opposite* way of how one enters the kingdom. They want people to follow themselves, not to trust in God, and certainly not to trust Jesus Christ. Indeed what Jesus said in Matthew 11:12 is true: the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent (false teachers) take it by force, taking it away from those who would welcome it if they heard about it. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, so if you hide the true Word of God, you shut up the door of faith. Certainly if God wants a person, He will see to it that they get the

Word through another means, bypassing the false teachers that are victimizing their students.

5. If there is *any* way that the evil one can obscure visibility to the narrow doorway of salvation, he will do it. He will use fake religious leaders, legalism, pride, self-righteousness, peer pressure, distractions, entertainment, worldly work and pleasures, education, and anything else to obscure the way of salvation.
6. The judgment is built into the crime: they are stubborn about the way of God and therefore do not enter the kingdom of God. They remain in the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan.

B. Woe #2, 23:14: Great Condemnation

This verse is absent from some older Greek manuscripts but it does appear in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 so we are assured that Jesus did say it.

1. The scribes and Pharisees devour widow's houses. The bottom line here is that the religious leaders were taking financial advantage of widows. That is 180 degrees out of phase with God's heart for widows (Malachi 3:5, James 1:27, Psalm 68:4-5, Isaiah 10:2, 1 Timothy 5:3). A widow would trust the scribe or Pharisee who was significant in her family's life to guide her about the estate once her husband died. Perhaps she did not understand financial matters very well and was overwhelmed with the responsibility. The religious leader could then take advantage of her and appropriate the property for himself somehow. Maybe he would convince her that donating the house to him or to the temple would benefit the ministry. But that

would mean that the family was left with little and the dead husband's provision for his wife was stolen.

2. They also make long prayers, but all under pretense. They are not genuinely speaking with God. Rather, they are speaking to themselves and their human audience, trying to make it look like they are very genuine and loving toward God and are on good speaking terms with him. See Luke 18:11-12 for an example of this. The true intended audience of the prayer is human, not divine.

C. Woe #3, 23:15: Making Sons of Hell

1. The religious leaders thought well of themselves that they were involved in a kind of missions work where they would go to far-away places and make disciples. In that era, they were making proselytes to the Jewish faith out of the Gentiles—Christians were not doing missions work yet (see Matthew 28:19-20 for that).
2. Sadly, once they converted the Gentile and taught him or her all their legalistic doctrine, they made him worse off than he was before. They succeeded only in putting the person onto the fast track to eternal punishment, like they themselves were.
3. The judgment is obvious: they are worthy of punishment for misleading people away from the grace of God into a false religion. That is among the worst of offenses that someone could do, because it is indeed worse than physical murder. It consigns someone to Hell for eternity, apart from the grace of God. It is TERRIBLE.

D. Woe #4, 23:16-22: Lying

1. The fourth woe is a little different than the others because it starts with the phrase, “Woe to you, blind guides...” This is a heavily ironic statement: a guide cannot be blind. He must have all his senses and wits about him to be able to guide others. The person *guided* might be blind, but the guide not so. Note that we are speaking of the metaphorical blindness of spiritual darkness—not of lack of eyesight. A physically blind person can be a perfect guide to spiritual truth! But a person who is dead in sin cannot tell anyone anything of use about how to be saved—unless they are reading the Bible out loud or similar. These Pharisees and scribes were blind to their own sinfulness (John 9:40) and yet thought of themselves as helpers to others. See Romans 2:17-25.
2. The problem the Lord is calling out is deceptive oaths. They would make a promise by the gold of the temple and it would be binding. They would promise by the temple itself, and it would not be binding. How they rationalized that is unclear. It was made up, like crossing your fingers while making a promise which shows you are actually lying. The point was that fine little details in how they said an oath would make it binding or not binding. Another variation on this theme was they would swear by the altar and it would mean nothing. But if they swore by the gift *on* the altar, then the oath was binding. This kind of deception gave them some advantage or some way out of an oath, so they thought. Where is this or anything like it found in the Law of Moses? It is not found there. They did not have God in their thinking whatsoever—they

were only thinking on the human level about who they could deceive. But you cannot deceive God because He sees everything. The fact that they did not “get” this shows that they were morally blind.

3. The Lord reserves the very strong title “fool” for these evil teachers. A fool is one who does not fear God (Prov. 1:7, 14:16). He is also stupid, and the two invariably go together, because those who do not fear God say and do the dumbest things—when looked at from the heavenly perspective.
 4. They had it entirely backwards, for one thing, because it was not the gold of the temple that was important—the temple was more important as the (former) dwelling place of God and the place where He was worshipped. The altar was what sanctified the gift, not the other way around.
 5. The Lord undercut their whole system by telling them that if you swear by the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, you *are* making an oath based on all of it—the altar and the temple. If you make an oath based on heaven, you are promising before God Almighty that you will do what you say.
 6. You might remember that elsewhere, because of this whole problem, the Lord taught that we should not make an oath at all. Just say what you mean, and mean what you say (Matthew 5:33-37).
- E. Woe #5, 23:23-24: Obsessing about Small Religious Observances
1. The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees concerned themselves with all kinds of minutiae but somehow

were able to work it out in their minds that they could ignore the most important matters of the law.

2. What is a scribe, by the way? They were scholars versed in the Law of Moses. But because their religion was fake, they were academic in their expertise.
3. One example the Lord gives is that they would give a tithe of small herbs—mint, anise, and cumin. These were insignificant, but the leaders put great emphasis on this *as a show of their religious activity*. But at the same time, they ignored the most important matters of the Law such as justice (compare to a small tithe of mint leaves) and mercy (compare to a little palmful of pieces of anise) and faith (compare to a dash of cumin). See also Zech. 7:9-10, Micah 6:8. They stole widows' houses and lied in their oaths, directed people away from the kingdom of God, but counted out 10% of their tiny herbs!
4. The Lord says that they should have kept their tithes but also and more importantly, they should have obeyed the bigger matters of the law. Caring for both—this does not mean the smaller can be left behind. Making the small big and making the big inconsequential is the problem. I have used this to remind myself and others that there are very important “big” Bible doctrines that we must hold, but that does not mean we can treat the smaller issues as unimportant. We must do our level best to believe and obey all of it, in its proper proportion. Also, this reminder of proportionality bleeds over into the idea of priority. You have to fill your life with the top priority things *first*, and not leave them for last,

otherwise the tendency is that they will not be done at all.

5. Another example that the Lord uses to explain this is the straining out of a gnat and swallowing a camel. To avoid drinking a beverage with an unclean gnat in it, some would filter or strain out their drink. They were concerned about this inconsequential matter, yet they swallowed the camels of lying and (likely) adultery and false teaching. Obviously this is a hyperbolic statement about camels because they did not literally swallow a camel. But they *accepted* terrible behavior while at the same time insisting on the heavy burden of filtering out every possible trace of an unclean gnat that makes no difference in one's relationship with God.¹

F. Woe #6: 23:25-26: Uncleaness Within

1. A similar theme permeates the sixth woe: these people were full of sin on the inside but nicely decorated on the outside.
2. The metaphor Jesus chooses here is that of a dirty or clean dish. The dish represents the life of the Pharisee or scribe. It is like wiping the outside of the cup or bowl, but leaving all the crusty food particles inside of it for the next person to use the dish that way. Yuck!
3. Their lives were full of extortion and self-indulgence. They played life to fulfill their sensual desires and greed. They were robbers, plunderers, and lacked self control. They were FULL of those evil qualities which put them on the other side of the ledger against God.

¹ Note the KJV translation has "strain at" a gnat. This is incorrect. The verb means to filter out or strain out, not strain *at*.

They were not pleasing the Lord in their behavior whatsoever.

4. The Lord told them to cleanse the inside of the cup and dish...then the outside would become clean as well. Unlike with dishwashing, **when you concern yourself with cleaning the inside of your life, the outside naturally follows.** But if you have a dirty inside, you must work doubly hard to clean the outside to keep up appearances. And remember that when the inside is dirty, it keeps “oozing out” from inside and making the outside dirty, so that you have to keep cleaning! Remember what the Lord said in Matthew 15:18-20 about defilement coming from within, not from without. With God’s Spirit indwelling you and cleaning you from the inside, you will not have to worry about the outside. Certainly you will need to repent and confess and apologize for sins done outwardly in the body, but that will become an anomaly, not a normal pattern of life. You will not have to make excuses and lie and cover up and all that because you are wearing the mask of a hypocrite. **Outside cleanliness comes naturally with inside purity.**
5. Think about the above **bold** statements above in your own life. Do you have things that you are trying to hide? Are you lying like the Pharisees, and also being hypocritical by trying to cover it up so others cannot see? Are you mainly concerned with outward appearances so that people will think well of you? Are you full on the inside of qualities like no self control, greed, and the like? Or are you mainly concerned with purity of your inward parts? What do you want more: a clean reputation or a clean conscience?

G. Woe #7: 23:27-28: More Uncleaness Within

1. This must have been a serious problem, because the Lord uses yet another illustration to show the corruption in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees.
2. This time, the picture is a whitewashed tomb. Think of a beautiful sepulcher or mausoleum, with the latter usually being a bigger building and the sepulcher being a smaller room or monument. It looks nice on the outside, but you do not necessarily want to spend a lot of time inside of it because it is full of dead bodies, bones, bad odors, and ceremonial uncleaness.
3. In the same way, the Pharisees and scribes appear righteous on the outside, from a distance. But when you look inside of their lives, they are completely given over to hypocrisy. They are pretenders, fakers, actors, impostors. They are not really religious. Their real motivations lie elsewhere, mainly with themselves and their own pleasure. Their religion is more like an inherited office that the person does not much care for.
4. Besides hypocrisy, another of the dead bodies inside of this whitewashed tomb is lawlessness. They live in complete disregard for the true meaning of the law. We see lawlessness today among those who are irreligious or not Christians. People throw stuff out of their car and litter on the streets without regard for the effect on others or the environment or the appearance of the neighborhood. You see people blow off stop signs. You see people demanding to be able to kill unborn babies. We are talking about God's law here, not man's law. Huge swaths of the culture are

given over to sexual promiscuity, breaking God's law for marriage. This is all to be expected from people who are blind, whose minds are limited in the moral realm, who are living in darkness. But from those who claim to be God's representatives, it is even more unacceptable. They pretend to be God's children, but live like the devil's children that they really are.

5. Once again we ask ourselves what is in our innermost thoughts and motivations? Do we think it is ok to be lawless, and even pretend that we are not while we are?

H. Woe #8: 23:29-36 Murderers of the Prophets

1. The Lord recounts recent history in which the religious leaders in Israel were busy engaged in projects to memorialize various prophets and righteous people. They built tombs and monuments and beautified them. This was a religious activity to them.
2. The Lord also reports that they thought—and said—the hypothetical that if they had lived back in the day of their forebearers, they would have been smarter and not killed the prophets.
3. One of those murdered is Abel—the very first murder victim. He was a man of God as evidenced by his faithful offering of an animal to God (see Genesis 4:1-8).
4. The other murder victim mentioned by Jesus is toward the very end of the Old Testament era, and that is a man named Zechariah—a common name. There was a Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:15-22 who was killed by the establishment types in Jerusalem. He was the son

of Jehoiada and thus a priest, as well as a prophet. After Jehoiada died, Joash began to follow man's ways instead of the ways of God. When confronted by Zechariah, he killed the prophet. At the king's command, they stoned this fine man of God, who pronounced a judgment on them as they died.

But the Lord did not say that this was Zechariah the son of Jehoiada. This was Zechariah the son of Berechiah (Zechariah 1:1), a different prophet.² They killed him between the altar and the temple. They are so unsanctified as to even use the temple precinct to murder a man of God. It seems that they murdered *two* prophets named Zechariah. I trust the Lord's words here.

5. Because the spirit of the religious leaders of Jesus's day was exactly the same as Cain and King Joash and all the rest of that bunch, they shared guilt with them. They are in a solidarity relationship with them—murderers of men of God from the beginning of world history to recent generations at the time of Jesus.
6. By saying that their fathers killed the prophets, they admit that they are offspring of those people. This admission is not accepted in the minds of the Pharisees, but it does show that they have an organic connection back to those earlier murderers. But they are more than physical descendants. They share the same spiritual desires and tendencies of those earlier generations of murderers. You might think this is a

² There is another explanation: Zechariah could have been grandson of Jehoiada, and his dad's name Berechiah. After all, Jehoiada did reach a very great age of 130 years. This would not violate the text of 2 Chronicles because "son of" is often used to mean "descendant of."

harsh analysis, but remember Jesus *knows everything in their hearts—and yours too*—and they proved Him right by killing John the Baptist and Jesus Himself.

7. There is no way for people who are unrepentant about this kind of sin to escape condemnation. In verse 32, the Lord sarcastically calls on them to fill up the measure of their fathers' guilt. Just go ahead and let it rip, guys. You are serpents, a brood of vipers, on the way to hell (Gehenna).
8. God has given them a multitude of opportunities to turn away from this wickedness by sending them many prophets, wise men, and scribes. But they persecuted and killed many of them. This adds up to a full measure of sin so that it will be clearly just for God to punish them for all that blood shed. The iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full, but when it was full, judgment would be poured out in abundance (Gen 15:16). With these "Jewish Amorites" God was very patient, but their history was punctuated with episodes of very serious judgment. And another one was coming. Over many hundreds of years the Pharisees and their ilk lived for themselves and their power and pleasure. Now not so.
9. *This generation* could refer to the nation of Israel as a whole—in particular in its unbelief. But it could also refer to that physical generation of people. Indeed, at AD 70 the temple was destroyed and the entire city was sacked. The disobedient people received some physical remuneration for their iniquity. The spiritual remuneration before God's judgment seat happened after they perished.

III. To the Entire Population: Jesus Laments, 23:37-39

A. The opening words of verse 37 are “Jerusalem! Jerusalem!” There is no “O” in the Greek text, but it is translated into English because of the very deep emotion that the Savior feels for this city’s inhabitants. He is speaking to the city both as a representative of its current residents, as well as its connection to the entire nation then present, as well as its connection to the entire nation’s history. He feels a deep sense of disaster and loss.

I do not believe this is sourced only in Jesus’s humanity. This is God the Son speaking.

- B. Jesus gives a statement as to the pattern of Jerusalem’s past behavior, namely that she is characterized by killing prophets and stoning those that God sends to her as messengers. They were about to repeat this pattern again with Jesus. This lifestyle of rejection of God’s messengers is the same thing as rejecting God Himself.
- C. Despite this terrible track record, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His role as the Divine savior, expresses how many times He desired to gather Jerusalem’s children (residents, the Jews) together in His loving arms. He wanted fellowship with them; a warm relationship with them; to offer them shelter and protection like a hen gathers chicks under her wings. He wanted to care for them like a mother for her children.
- D. Very sadly, they would not have God’s care. They “were not willing.” They had no desire for God, for His righteousness, for grace. They liked human performance-based religion, legalism, power structures, wealth,

pleasure, and the like. These are things that the flesh likes.

God felt like a rejected spouse feels when the love of their life does not want them anymore.

- E. Then comes in verse 38 the short statement of judgment. Behold! Because of this intransigent unwillingness—stubbornness—they were destined for a desolate, deserted future. While the Lord was with them was the opportunity to live like a green tree. When they kill Him and He leaves, they will be like a dry tree, with no fruit and no life. Without a connection to the life-giving vine, they will come to nothing.

So too we—John 15:1-5.

It turned out that within about 40 years, the city itself was destroyed. After the Lord left, the Jewish religious system had very little of value remaining. Moses's seat was set aside as the Old Covenant faded and then disappeared. The authority that the Pharisees had in that seat was no more. The apostles said in Acts 4:19 that they had to obey God rather than the empty authority of the Jewish religious leaders. Their hypocrisy was total, their failure complete, and God set them aside in favor of working with a new thing—the church.

- F. Now verse 39: the city will not see Jesus again until they (and their nation) responds properly to the Lord and show once again that they “are willing” to be gathered under his wings. I think therefore the Lord did not show himself openly after His resurrection. His appearances were rather limited, though still with many believing eyewitnesses (1 Cor. 15:5-8).

Their willingness will be expressed when they once again say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Some people welcomed Jesus in at the triumphal entry with those words in Matthew 21:9, quoting from Psalm 118:26. But the nation at large was rejecting Christ, and God requires them to repent and welcome Him before He will pour out blessing on them.

That will occur after a terrible time of tribulation when the nation will call out in desperation and repentance toward God. See Zechariah 12:10-11, Jer. 50:4-5, Ezekiel 39:25-29, Joel 2:28-32.

But for them at that time, it is too late. Judgment was decreed.

Conclusion

From our initial state born into sin, we have to change our willingness toward God. We start out wanting to please ourselves, and this results in the kind of misdirected religion that the Pharisees and the scribes exhibited. It was hypocritical, filthy, lying, greedy, and just sinful all the way around. But if we repent of these kinds of things and change our minds so that we are willing to draw near to the Lord and have Him as our protector, guide, and savior, then we will be rescued from our stubborn, dirty lives.

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