



Woe To You

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 23:13-33

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Last week we looked at the introduction to Jesus' last sermon before a mixed multitude of Israelites as He was in the Temple on Wednesday of the Passover week. Somewhat surprisingly, we saw that the theme of His last sermon was not an exposition of the gospel of the Kingdom, not a further description of the principles of life in the Kingdom, but the central theme is a message of condemnation of false teachers and religious hypocrites – the Pharisees. It was Jesus versus the Pharisees.

Powerfully, directly, fearlessly, pointedly Jesus thundered against their hypocrisy, exposing the wicked reality of their pretend piety before the people. He dissected their hypocrisy and revealed them as: usurpers of God's authority, as men without integrity, as graceless oppressors, as appearance-driven self-promoters, and ultimately as glory stealers.

Jesus' point in this introduction to his sermon was to show decisively and irrefutably that the heart of the faithful believer is motivated by something far different. The desire of the faithful and true Christian is to submit to and live under God's authority, to live a life of integrity and true uprightness, to receive and to give grace, to do good to others and serve them in Christ's name, to make little of themselves, to never contend for God's glory or obscure Him in any way, but to live for His praise and fame.

The introduction out of the way, Jesus now turns his attention to the Pharisees themselves and in rapid succession pronounces a series of woes against them, speaking directly to them, delivering a blistering condemnation of their character. Before we look at each woe individually, I think it is important that we just think for a moment about:

The Heart of Christ in the This Sermon We need to understand the heart behind these severe and intense words from Christ. I don't want us, for even a moment, to think that these words might be over the top or that they are in any way like an angry outburst that we as sinful humans might be guilty of. That is not what this is. Jesus is not merely venting on the Pharisees. No, these words are spoken with pastoral intent, for the protection of His flock and for the upholding of God's truth and His glory. Being the Truest Man of God ever to walk this earth, Jesus could not and would not ignore soul-killing error but instead challenged and condemned it in the most graphic of ways, leaving nothing unsaid that needed to be said. His open confrontation of the Pharisees is frank and like a battering ram, devastating in its intensity -- He calls them sons of hell, blind guides, fools, whitewashed tombs, serpents, vipers and of course, hypocrites, but His words are purposeful and calculated.

First, they are calculated to show clearly God's hatred of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is an abominable sin before the eyes of God. Jesus' words to the Pharisees are a clear declaration of how God hates sin and will judge sin.

Second, they are calculated to be a warning to us as His disciples, to pastors, to the professing people of God of the temptation to religious and spiritual gamesmanship. They are meant to hedge us in, to guard us and keep us on the path of righteousness and holiness. This is in keeping with the promise of Proverbs 2:6-8, where it says: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints." (Proverbs 2:6-8, ESV) In openly reproofing the Pharisees as He does, Jesus is teaching, correcting and training us for righteousness so that we will be complete and equipped for every good work. (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Third, they are given to us to protect us from falling prey to false teachers, to expose their character and the deadliness of their false teaching, the prevalence of enemies of the truth, and by contrast to help us to recognize and to value and esteem those who are faithful for the sake of our souls. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work." (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a, ESV)

Fourth, they are meant to protect us from the foolish notion that sincerity equals salvation. It doesn't. The Pharisees were some of the most sincere guys around, not in the sense that they were honest and upright, but in the sense that they were devoted to what they believed. You hear people saying all the time that although someone may not be clear on the gospel, at least they are sincere and so it will turn out for them in the end. Listen, sincerity for what is evil and wrong is no virtue, according to Scripture it is evil. I know that runs counter to our thinking and doesn't seem nice, but it is the truth. Sincere devotion to spiritual error as it regards salvation in Christ, as it regards the gospel is not a virtue. Sincerity in soul-killing error is not commendable, it is condemning. Paul said of the Jews, for instance: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." (Romans 10:1-3, ESV) Don't be lulled into thinking that sincerity equals salvation; it doesn't.

Last, these thunderous words to the Pharisees are not given without hope. These last words to the Pharisees and scribes are not vague, not general, not hard to understand. Received in the right Spirit, with humility and in brokenness, these words would lead them to repentance, to turning from their sins and to Christ for salvation. And as I mentioned last week through this hard preaching, and the powerful proclamation of the truth by the disciples after Pentecost, some, certainly not all and perhaps not many, but some of these very men would come to saving faith in Christ. (cf. Acts 15:5) Luke tells us in Acts 6: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests (which would have included some of the scribes and Pharisees) became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7, ESV)

So as fierce as Jesus is with the Pharisees, He is loving to His disciples. Last week in our home group, we were talking about Jesus' introduction to this sermon and when I asked how the sermon impacted them, one of our group said that they felt really loved by Christ, that Christ was hedging us in and protecting us, caring for our souls. That is an absolutely right response. So let's look at these seven woes that Jesus pronounces on the scribes and the Pharisees and may the Spirit of God grant us understanding as we do.

The Seven Woes (v. 13-32) As we get into these woes, there are two words that are prominently featured that we need to rightly define, woe and hypocrite. The word "woe" is a complex one. A woe is an exclamation that contains within it anger, grief and sorrow. On the

lips of Jesus, a woe is an exclamation of judgment, of curse, upon God's enemies but also of sadness over those who fail to recognize the true misery of their condition. It mingles a declaration of doom with one last call to repent.

The word "hypocrite" was a word that was originally used in connection with actors. The reason than an actor was called a hypocrite was because he played a part that was not who he really was. Actors in those days would act wearing a mask, speaking under a mask. You can see how this fit the Pharisees. They played the part of painstaking observance of the law of Moses, but underneath, they were proud, arrogant, full of iniquity, devastatingly depraved, but if you looked at them, they gave off the appearance of being the religious ideal of righteousness in the community. So let's work our way through these woes that Jesus pronounces against the Pharisees.

You may notice that there is no verse 14 and that is because in the best manuscripts, Matthew's gospel does not contain it. That is not to say that verse 14 is not true. It was probably added in at a later time by a well-meaning scribe who borrowed its thoughts from Mark Chapter 12, verse 40 and Luke Chapter 20, verse 47. The statements of verse 14 are indeed true and come from those other texts, but do not appear in the original texts of Matthew. So we have here seven woes, seven curses. Jesus will not allow the scribes and Pharisees to go on sinning without rebuke. So let's look at what He says.

Woe #1: "'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.'" (Matthew 23:13, ESV) I cannot imagine how shocking and pointed this would be to hear. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Woe to you, you hypocrites, for you keep people from eternal life and you miss it too." How? By standing in opposition to Christ and His gospel. That is what the scribes and Pharisees did. They systematically opposed the gospel at every turn. When John preached, when Jesus preached, they tried to keep people from believing the words that John and Jesus preached. They denied the words of Christ, misinterpreted the Word of God, rejected Christ's claims as Messiah and as the Son of God, and His rightful rule over the hearts and souls of men. They denied grace and mercy, denied the need for brokenness before the Lord, they shut up heaven through their system of works righteousness and tradition that had no place for Jesus Christ.

We see it today in the unconverted pastor who turns Christianity into a means of prosperity, the man who reduces Christianity to a good way to live, the evangelical pastor who preaches a reductionist and truncated gospel, a gospel that is absent real teaching regarding the sinfulness

of man, the unadulterated holiness of God and the only hope of salvation through faith in Christ's shed blood and glorious resurrection, the pastor who undermines faith in the authority of Scripture, in Christ's miracles, in the efficacy of Jesus' atoning death, offering platitudes and behavior modification – financial advice, relationship wisdom, blah, blah, blah – rather than life giving truth, the men who write destructive books masquerading as spiritual truth, the pastor who plays church, but who neither knows Christ nor makes Him known. They damn men's souls and damn themselves because Christ is not their Lord and they are not His men. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

Woe #2: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23:15, ESV) The Pharisees had a zeal for converts, a zeal for winning followers, not for God but for themselves, for their system of religion, to extend their fame and influence. They labored long and hard to get people to join their ranks, not from any desire to rescue their souls and bring them to God, but to give validity to them. Their converts "out-Phariseed the Pharisees" in their hypocrisy and unbelief. They became twice the child of hell that the Pharisees were. They took the godless legalism and tradition to the next level becoming even greater lovers of the lie.

How often we see this with the false teachers of this day who soften the message of the cross, who obscure the gospel, who eliminate the call to holiness, obedience, service, faithfulness and devotion to God in order to swell the ranks of their little fiefdoms. They fashion their message after the spirit of the age to make it attractive to fallen men and women so that they will join them in their religious rebellion against God. We see the miserable fruit of such evangelism in the vast number of people who call themselves Christians and have no regard for Christ, no regard for His Word, no knowledge of His truth. Woe to those men!

Woe #3: "'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.'" (Matthew 23:16–22, ESV) The

Pharisees were masters of subverting the truth, of trivializing obedience to God. God is a God of truth and these guys were just accomplished liars. Jesus calls them fools, literally morons. In particular, Jesus points His finger at the way they subverted the truth through their elaborate system of oaths. Taking oaths, for the Pharisees, was just a way to lie. The whole thing was just ridiculous and nonsensical. This is how it worked. If you swore by the temple, you didn't have to keep your word but if you swore by the gold – well that was binding. And the altar was nothing, but the gift on the altar, that's another story.

Jesus points out just how stupid this all is. Whatever oath you are taking is before the Lord. There are no loopholes, no excuses to disobey God, no elaborate system of oaths you can take that eliminate your responsibility for obedience to the Lord and faithfulness to your word. That is why Jesus says: whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. In other words, if you swear by anything that represents God, a gift, an altar, the gold of the temple, the temple, the heaven of heavens, the throne of God, you swear by God. They subverted the truth. They developed human reasoning that undermined the truth. They did all this because they were liars and were by nature and practice suppressors of the truth. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." (Romans 1:18, ESV)

Blind guides Jesus calls them. They thought themselves to be the spiritual guides of the people but by their constant suppression and evasion of the plain truth, they were woefully blind. They couldn't find their way out of a wet paper bag if it had an arrow. They were blind guides leading the blind.

We have the same thing today in the men that are constantly saying of things that excruciatingly clear it the Word of God, "That's not what God meant, not what Jesus meant" and they go around their elbow to get to their ear in order to justify ignoring the clear truth and commands of Scripture, to justify their sinful and wicked desires and make their followers feel justified in doing the same. These men, loophole hunters, have no shortage of hearers who follow them right into hell. Woe to those men, blind guides and fools. He goes on.

Woe #4: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.

These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matthew 23:23–24, ESV) The Pharisees were the kings of exalting trivial things above the things that really mattered. Take this issue of tithing mint and dill and cumin. There was no command in the Word of God to do that. You could if you felt compelled by conscience, but there was no requirement. The law required tithing of grain, wine, oil, fruit from trees, and the firstborn of flocks. But the Pharisees had expanded this to include household spices. The Pharisees got wrapped up in the minutia of the law, debating and parsing every word and neglected the weightier matters – justice, mercy and faithfulness. It reminds you of the words of Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, ESV) The Pharisees would debate to their hearts content such trivialities but manage to miss the great realities of the faith. They missed the forest, not for the tree but for the knot on the tree.

Far too many Christians today have that same herb mentality. They will go to war it seems over inconsequential and minor things while failing in basic faithfulness to Christ and in their relationship to others. There are men in pulpits that have all sorts of themes and emphases to their ministries. If it isn't Christ and Him crucified – Repent! It is all a smokescreen for a lack of faithfulness to Christ.

So ridiculous were the Pharisees that Jesus mocked one of their common practices as a illustration. He said to them, You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Jesus is making fun of the way that they would drink their wine, sucking the wine into their mouth with their teeth clenched so that they would keep from drinking the occasional stray gnat that may land in their wine. They would strain it out with their teeth. They labored hard to avoid ingesting an unclean gnat, but they swallowed a camel, they harbored in their hearts a mountain of sinful practices. They were painstaking about formal, ceremonial trivialities but they were unconcerned about their hypocrisy, dishonesty, cruelty, greed, self worship, and a number of other sins.

Woe #5: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean." (Matthew 23:25–26, ESV) Jesus goes right to the heart of the Pharisees' problem. They are concerned only about outward appearances and not inward realities. Jesus illustrated this problem by talking about

how the Pharisees would argue over the manner in which a cup or a plate should be cleaned externally in order for it to be acceptable and considered ceremonially clean without ever addressing the inside of it. It was the perfect picture of their deformed and worthless religion. They labored diligently to appear holy on the outside, but their hearts were filthy, filled with greed and covetousness, self-indulgence and decadence.

In fact, the word used for greed is a word that means to plunder and to rape. It is a strong word. We see that kind of thing in Christianity today, men and women who put forth a certain image and message, who fleece the flock for their own gain, who use and abuse the people and peddle supposed godliness as a means of gain. They use people for their personal gain – books, merchandise, speaking fees, special considerations and accommodations – it’s sickening. They become rich with a peddled piety, having the heart of a thief and self-gratification.

Woe #6: ““Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27–28, ESV) This statement by Jesus is particularly pointed. Let me explain why. Each year at the end of the month of March, before the Passover, the spring rains would fall all over Israel. The rain would be so heavy that it would wash away the whitewash that was upon the homes and upon the tombs. Every year, as sort of a community project, the people of Jerusalem would reapply whitewash to their homes, but particularly to the tombs that surrounded Jerusalem so that whenever pilgrims were coming to the temple for the Passover, they would not inadvertently touch a tomb and be made unclean. With all of the whitewash that had been freshly applied, Jerusalem shimmered and shined in the sunlight. The tombs looked beautiful on the outside, but they were unclean.

Jesus used this picture to say to the Pharisees in essence, “You look beautiful on the outside, but you contaminate everyone you come in contact with. You contaminate their thinking, their morals, their understanding of the Word of God, their religious practices, their understanding of righteousness, their worship of God -- everything about them. You, your person, who you are, you are dead in your soul and you contaminate and bring to ruin everyone around you.” It is the same with false teachers today, with false professors of Christ – they contaminate and pollute everyone around them. They do not offer life, but death. Then Jesus comes to the climax of the woes that He pronounces against the Pharisees.

Woe #7: ““Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.” (Matthew 23:29–32, ESV) Woe to the Pharisees because they were enemies of God, enemies of His servants, enemies of His truth, enemies of the gospel. They are enemies of the Living God. They didn’t wear a sign that said so, of course. They pretended to venerate and honor the prophets, decorating their tombs and erecting monuments to their memories – the very people whom their fathers killed.

But Jesus knows their hearts; He knows what they are thinking, what they are planning and so He says to them -- Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. He knows they are conniving to exceed even their fathers in their enmity against God, by putting to death the greatest prophet of all – the Prophet Messiah, the Savior King. They acted as if they honored God’s messengers but in reality they hated them, because they hated God and they hated God’s gospel. That is the true heart of the Pharisee, of the False Prophet. Hear me on this. They are not a little confused on doctrine, a little confused on the gospel – they are haters of God and haters of His Christ and His gospel. Jesus concludes this main part of the sermon by asking the question of questions:

How Will You Escape? (v. 33) “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matthew 23:33, ESV) How would these serpents, these servants of Satan; how would these vipers, these snakes in the grass, these outwardly beautiful and deceptive but spiritually dead and deadly men escape from the judgment of hell? There is only one answer to that question isn’t there? There is only one escape from the perilous condition they were, the condemnation of God which they were under. Their only hope was standing before them, the very One whom they rejected, whom they refuse to acknowledge, refused to honor, refused to confess, despite all of His teaching, his miracles, His character, the fulfilled prophecy – all of it -- Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

How ironic that the only way of deliverance for the Pharisees from the wrath that is to come against the sinfulness of man, against their and sinfulness, was the very person and the very message that these false teachers seek to obscure and refuse to preach.

There is only one escape from hell and death and that is Jesus. Jesus Christ, the One who moved by a love for His Father and for sinners whom He would redeem, determined to do everything necessary to save us. He endured and exhausted the wrath of God's judgment for which we were by our own works inescapably destined, and so won for us forgiveness, redemption, justification, adoption and glory. He paid to the very last the cost and price for our sins so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. He became a man and suffered in His body the curse which was due the sons of Adam, so that by a substitute for guilty man, God could punish sin, our sin, in Him so that He pour forth in bountiful mercy upon those who believe in the only Substitute, the only Savior, Jesus Christ.

Their only hope of escape is Jesus Christ, the very One they were determined to put to death, but who through that death would save for Himself a people for the praise of His name.

Takeaways From the Text

What can we take away from this text this morning? Well, if you are a believer, you ought to thank God that you have heard gospel truth and that here in this place you are hearing the saving truth of Christ's gospel. This church is not perfect. We always have room to grow in faithfulness and conformity to the will of God, but I will say that our hearts should rejoice, we should be exceedingly thankful, that we should give to God worship and thanksgiving from the depth of our hearts, never taking it for granted that, by His grace, we hear the truth of God preached and taught faithfully in this church, from children to adult, week after week. That is a great grace from God and nothing to be taken lightly. Thank God that we are in a church where the truth is preached, and believed, and lived out. That is a very rare thing in this day.

Let this text serve as a prayer list for the pastors of this church, for the spiritual leaders in the homes, and for yourselves. Spiritual death under religious veneer is no less a danger to day as it was then. It must be avoided at all costs. Pray for those who are spiritual authorities in your lives would be delivered from these temptations, pray that you would yourself be protected from the seeds of such sin. But even more, pray not jus that these temptations would not befall you or your pastors or spiritual authorities but pray that the very opposite character would be established in your life and in ours. Pray that we would all be those who open the

door to heaven by faithful speaking of the gospel, by faithful living of lives that have obviously been touched by the grace of God. Pray that we would all be used of God to point men and women to the way of righteousness and life with Christ, that we would lead people into the truth; that we would keep the main thing the main thing, that we would never use others for our own gain but pour ourselves out for the sake of their well being, that we would be the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere, the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14–16, ESV), that we would be faithful to Christ.

Beloved, we cannot play at Christianity. Following Christ cannot be merely a convenience or a tradition. Neither can we be wishy-washy, or indecisive, or vacillating when it comes to believing, living, proclaiming, and guarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must be bold, our devotion clear.

I exhort you today:

- To be unashamed of Jesus Christ and His gospel.
- To walk in a manner worthy of the calling Christ, to live by faith in the Son of God who has loved you and given His life for you.
- To lay aside the pursuit of worldly treasures as your chief goal and instead seek for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and everything will be added to you.
- To be uncompromising in the truth, steadfast in the gospel, obedient to the word of life, and to refuse to negotiate at the table or be mediocre in your faithfulness to Jesus.
- To make your life in Christ, abiding in Him, obeying Him in love, serving Him, making much of Him, loving Him with an unadulterated, undiluted, whole-hearted love.

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