

The Seven “Woes” Against False Righteousness

Matt. 23:13-33

Intro. Edward Gibbon, author of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, wrote this: In the days of the empire the various modes of worship that prevailed “*were considered by the people to be equally true, by the philosophers (to be) equally false, and by the magistrates (to be) equally useful.*” Does that sound familiar? Under the predominant influence of relativism, it’s commonly believed today that many paths lead to God and none should be considered superior to the others.

In sharp contrast we come this morning to **Matt. 23** and the seven woes Jesus pronounced against false righteousness or false salvation. It’s a passage that makes modern commentators squirm with discomfort. Some question if these really are the words of Jesus. Others wish He hadn’t said these things. It’s an inconvenient message for those who think of Jesus only in terms of love and tolerance ...a Jesus who accepts every religious viewpoint and respects every kind of faith no matter what it’s based on or how it’s practiced. Most prefer a kind and gentle Jesus who would never send anyone to Hell. Yet their “designer Jesus” isn’t the Jesus of the Bible. The Lamb of God is also revealed as the Lion of Judah. The meek and lowly savior is also the righteous judge who will return with eyes like blazing fire and a sharp two-edged sword in his hand. So, if the judgments of this chapter seem out of character, it’s not because Matthew caught Jesus on a bad day. It may be that our thoughts about Jesus are inadequate and unbiblical. **Matt. 23** reveals the righteous indignation of the Son of God expressed against hypocrites who distort the truth while leading others astray.

While it’s true that spiritual error and a false form of righteousness was concentrated in the Pharisees, we’d miss the impact of this chapter if we consign soul-destroying teachings to these clerics only. Their works righteousness infects every religious system apart from pure Christianity. To be right with God, every system requires its followers to do certain things and to avoid other things. I say, “pure Christianity” because even some sects within Christendom have added works to the grace that saves us. Instead of many paths to God, Jesus said the way is narrow and exclusive. The NT defines this narrow way. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For some, this way seems too narrow. Human pride resists grace and the fact that Christ has done everything necessary to save the foulest sinner. It’s felt we must contribute something...we must have a share in achieving our salvation. Believing in Jesus is too simple. Yet as Jesus said, the broad way, which represents every form of works-salvation, leads to destruction and many are choosing that way.

Last time in our study of **vs.1-12** Jesus described the attitudes and practices of spiritual leaders who are not to be followed. They don’t practice what they preach / they load people down with religious rules and obligations while offering no mercy or help / they view holiness as a photo op...an occasion to look good / and they crave recognition and pre-eminence. They are leaders none should follow. Speaking to His followers Jesus disallowed clerical pecking orders and pinning on titles. Instead, we are brothers and sisters called to serve each other...(say that with me) **For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.**

At **v.13**, Jesus addressed the Pharisees and Scribes who were part of this crowd gathered around Him. What follows in **vs.13-36** has been called *The Seven Woes of Jesus*. They are seven charges leveled against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Scribes. Church beware...they’re blistering!

The word **woe** is often used to express grief / regret / misfortune / or grievous distress. I’m sure you heard about the pastor whose horse was taught to stop at his “*woe*” command and gallop when he said, “*Praise the Lord.*” Well it seems he rode his horse right up to the rim of the Grand Canyon and said, “*woe.*” His obedient horse stopped. Looking at that incredible canyon and how close he was to that perilous cliff he said, “*Praise the Lord!*” (You needed that!)

But at times the sense of pain can leave us almost speechless. **Woe** is that kind of word. It's more a groan than a word. Yet the biblical definition of **woe** is even more woeful than this. The word **woe** in the Greek is *ouai*. It conveys more than just a feeling expressed. **Woe** is a judgment. We see this clearly in **chaps 8-12** of the Book of Revelation. There it means something like, "*oh no!*" **Woe** signifies impending doom. It's an expression of condemnation and God's wrath. The greatest concentration of **woes** in the Bible is found here in **Matt 23**. Here, Jesus speaks these **woes** against the religious leaders who believed in their own righteousness, which is really no righteousness at all. But in these charges we should sense the deep sadness of God. To the loving savior, Israel's defection from God and the truth was unreasonable, unnecessary and heart-wrenching.

1. The first woe – vs. 13 – the charge: exclusion (blocking the entrance to salvation)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”

Last time we pointed out the connection between the beatitudes of **Matt.5** and the seven woes spoken here. In the first beatitude Jesus said, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Jesus said He is the gate. Trust in Him is the way to enter the kingdom. But having rejected John's call to repent of sin and now by rejecting Jesus Himself, the Pharisees and Law teachers said *“no thanks”* to God's way. Rather than submit to the righteousness which comes by faith in Jesus, they persisted in the deceitfulness of self-righteousness. They were proud and anything but poor in spirit. They felt they could earn heaven and God's approval by their own efforts, but they along with so many others, were wrong.

Not only were these religious men in error and consequently shut out of the kingdom, but their teachings and influence discouraged others from coming to Jesus. Jesus said they **shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces**. This is a serious offense. It's one thing to say *“no”* to God's salvation plan, but it's far more serious to obstruct others from coming to Jesus. Earlier in **Matt. 18:6** Jesus said, **if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.**

Yet this is a true indictment against many in our day. We have many churches that preach all sorts of humanitarian themes but stop short of preaching the Gospel. Many will remember Bob and Carol Snider. The Sniders came to Mayfair after Bob had met with the pastor of the church they attended for many years. Bob asked the pastor why he didn't preach the Gospel. His pastor bluntly said, *“the Gospel is irrelevant!”* My cousin once pastored a church like that. He used to send us their monthly newsletter. The church was fully engaged in social and environmental issues but silent about the Gospel and the sinner's need of Christ.

The same indictment applies to seminary professors who undermine belief in the authority of the Bible / the deity of Christ / the reality of miracles / the efficacy of Christ's atoning death / and the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. By their own skepticism and unbelief, they block people from entering the kingdom of heaven. So the first charge Jesus leveled against the Pharisees was for exclusion, for blocking the entrance to salvation and the kingdom by rejecting Jesus.

You'll notice **v.14** is missing...there is no **v.14**. While a verse was included in some translations, scholars tell us that verse isn't found in the earliest and best manuscripts. It's believed to have been inserted by a scribe who borrowed it from **Lk. 20:47**.

2. The second woe – **v. 15** the charge: corruption (infecting converts with error)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

The second woe is an extension of the first. Not only did the Pharisees block people from entering Christ's kingdom, but they drew them into their camp and corrupted them in the process. Down through the centuries, the Jews were not very evangelistic. In his letter to the Romans Paul said they failed in their commission to be **a light to the Gentiles**. To some degree that seems to have changed in the era when Jesus came. Historians say an evangelistic fervor emerged that prompted Jews to travel great distances in search of proselytes or converts to Judaism. We see a reflection of this in the Judaizers who opposed Paul and traveled as far as Galatia to corrupt the faith of his young believers.

But what good is a proselyte if that person is converted to a false system that leads them to Hell? Because converts to a legalistic system are sometimes more zealous and fanatical than their teachers, Jesus said, **you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are**. False religious ideas like legalism / asceticism / and mysticism operate by the law of diminishing returns. Each instance of a rule kept / each act of self-humility / or each mystical experience must be more spectacular than the one before. So, converts often plunge more deeply in error than their teachers.

The British theologian Matthew Poole wrote this about the Pharisees. *"Their business was not to turn men from sin unto God, but merely to convert them to an opinion."* In this respect, Israel's religious leaders were like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. They were courageous and energetic messengers with a false message. Please friends...don't take their literature or invite them in. No matter what they may say at the door, they deny the deity of Jesus Christ. **II Jn. 7-11 - Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.** So the second charge targeted their corrupting influence.

3. The third woe – vs. 16-22 the charge: distortion (deceptively invalidating oaths)

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

The Jews viewed an oath as a pledge that was absolutely binding. But their lawyers devised loopholes which provided "outs" or "escape clauses." By making fine distinctions, an oath and its consequences could be invalidated and broken. In effect, they were like the guy who makes a promise with his fingers crossed behind his back. Jesus cited examples of those who swore by the Temple or by the altar. Swearing by the Temple was considered a non-binding oath. But if someone swore by the gold of the temple...that oath was binding. The same was true with regard to swearing by the altar as opposed to swearing by the gift on the altar.

Jesus exposed this as distortion. He insisted that the gold was not greater than the temple and the gift was not greater than the altar. He pointed out that any oath based on the Temple or the things in the Temple were binding because all of these things belong to God who lives in His Temple.

If you recall, Jesus had corrected this sin previously. In **Matt. 5:34-37** He said, **But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.** This represents God's standard for truth-telling.

3 x's in this third woe, Jesus said the Pharisees were **blind...blind guides, blind fools, and blind men**. This is how God views everybody who handles the truth so deceitfully whether through the fine print of a slippery contract or a meaningless promise. They are blind. They fail to see issues clearly. Everything in their world is cloudy. In **Matt. 15:14** Jesus spoke to His disciples and said, **"Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."**

James Montgomery Boice writes, *"I suggest this happens whenever teachers make delicate distinctions about things the Bible teaches, arguing, "This may be sin, but this closely related type of misconduct is not" or, "Jesus may be saying this, but again He may be saying something quite different."* Rather than take the Bible at face value, they fail to admit that truth is truth and that truth is binding on everyone. This subtle kind of reasoning opens the door to evil.

4. The fourth woe – **vs. 23, 24** the charge: inversion (majoring on minors while neglecting what is important)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

In the OT, the Jews were required to tithe the increase of their crops and their herds. The **tithe** should never be compared to the grace giving of the NT because the tithe was really an income tax paid to support the theocracy. It was mandatory giving. And make a note of this...the tenth was just the first tithe. On top of the tenth were two other tithes that when added totaled about 23% of a Jew's annual income. So when someone says, *"I gave my tithe"*, we should say, *"Oh, you mean 23% of your income?"* That tends to cure our inclination to cling to a term that disappears in the NT.

Now remember, the Pharisees were all about law-keeping. In an effort to scrupulously comply with the tithing law, the Pharisees tithed even the spice plants the lady of the house grew in a pot on her windowsill. They counted out the plant's seeds and leaves...*"One for God, nine for us. One for God, nine for us."* Though the Law didn't specifically require this, this is what they did. **But...Jesus said, you have neglected the more important matters of the law.** They majored on minors. They made a big deal over unimportant things while neglecting things that are truly important. And what is truly important to God?...things like **justice, mercy and faithfulness**. Rather than devote themselves to these virtues which is more difficult...the Pharisees chose the easier business of counting seeds. While not discouraging tithing, Jesus said you should have devoted yourself to **justice, mercy and faithfulness**. They were guilty of inversion. Like the guy who broke into the department store and switched all the price tags, they made important matters unimportant and unimportant matters important. Once again, Jesus called them **blind guides** because they lacked discernment.

They failed to distinguish weightier commands from those that are lighter. He said they were like a man who strained his wine through gauze to be sure he didn't swallow a gnat, but then swallowed a camel. Though these charges were serious this must have sent ripples of laughter through the crowd.

But aren't we sometimes guilty of inversion? The church has often made a big deal out of some petty issues while excusing more serious sins like envy / materialism / gossip / and gluttony. Many Christians are careful to wear a skirt or necktie on Sunday but they've never spoken a word about Christ to their neighbor. We miss the impact of these woes if we don't allow them to test our own hearts. If the shoe fits, we need to wear it. This charge of inversion is very convicting.

5. The fifth woe – vs. 25, 26 the charge: ceremonialism – (cleansing only what is outward) **"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.**

We know the Jews had an elaborate ceremony for hand washing. But their lawyers had also drawn up detailed ceremonial rules for washing cups and dishes. How would you feel if served food on a plate that was clean only on the bottom or served a beverage in a cup that was clean only on the outside? A dirty cup or plate would contaminate your food or beverage. Yet Jesus wasn't talking about food service. He created an analogy to explain inner defilement. In sheer hypocrisy, the Pharisees prettied up the outside of their lives while failing to address the corruption within. This is ceremonialism. They bathed and covered their bodies with clean robes. But under the robes God saw hearts **full of greed and self-indulgence**. In **I Sam. 16:7** the prophet Samuel said, **"The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."** Again, Jesus called them **blind** because they failed to see as God sees...they failed to discern what matters most to God.

Haven't we all done this one way or 10 others? We've put on our Sunday best without apologizing for a snarky comment we made on the way to church? We paste on smiles and a happy face when inside we're seething because somebody sat in our pew or someone seemed to snub us in the corridor? We participate in communion while some relationship is in shambles. The examples are endless. Ceremonialism cleanses only what is outward. Jesus said, **First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.**

The sixth woe is closely related to the fifth. I think Jesus repeated this one for emphasis because it was such an enormous issue among the Pharisees. You know they were good looking, right?

6. The sixth woe – vs. 27, 28 the charge: externalism (excessive concern with outer appearances)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

During the month of Adar which led up to Passover, the Jews had a custom. Because crowds of pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem for the festival, the Jews would whitewash the tombs that surrounded the city. Like yellow painted on a raised slab of concrete to prevent tripping, the tombs were whitewashed so no one would accidentally bump into one and be defiled. The tombs never looked better than they did during Passover. And Jesus said, you Pharisees are just like those tombs. Outwardly, you look great, but inwardly, you're **full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.**

The Pharisees went to great lengths to appear **righteous**, but inwardly, they were **full of hypocrisy and wickedness**.

These woes demonstrate the all-seeing, all-knowing omniscience of Jesus Christ. He knows us inside out. This divine attribute proves again that Jesus is God and that God had really come among us. We wouldn't have much to do with each other if we knew the each other's thoughts and innermost secrets. But Jesus knows the junk in our hearts and minds and loves us anyway. He knew all about these men but He loved them. His condemnation was mixed with deep sadness. Each **woe** was an "oh no moment" / It was a bitter sigh that said, "*Listen friends, it doesn't have to be this way.*" We see this so clearly in **v. 37** where Jesus said, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.** That's God's heart of love speaking and that's next Sunday. Ya'll come back now hear?

7. The seventh woe – **vs. 29-33** the charge: pretension (professed innocence)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

In honor and celebration of the righteous men who lived before them, the Jews built them tombs and decorated their graves. They honored men who had turned from God and committed such terrible crimes against His government. They were quick to boast that their own righteousness was greater than these who had died. They claimed that if they had lived in the days of their forefathers, they wouldn't have killed the prophets God sent. Yet Jesus knew the truth about them. He knew they were conspiring to kill Him. He knew they were just as evil as these patriarchs had been. By rejecting and crucifying the Son of God they would finish the crime, bring Israel's sin to a climax and fill up the sin of their forefathers. He knew their righteousness was all pretense...all lip service...all show.

So Jesus called them **snakes** and a **brood** or **family of vipers**. The poisonous snake that inhabits the Middle East is the saw-scaled viper. It's an aggressive snake known for its deadly venom and its ability to leap and strike from beneath a bush or from its hiding place in a pile of rocks. It was this snake that bit so many Hebrews during their wilderness wanderings and this snake that bit Paul when he was on the Isle of Malta. Jesus said, you're a family of them. You disguise yourselves and are just as deadly as vipers. Your father is the devil, that old serpent, and you are His children.

Jesus then asked the most sobering question in the Bible...**How will you escape being condemned to hell?** We need to personalize this question and ask...*How will I escape being condemned to hell?* What is my plan? What will I say when I stand before God someday...and I will? Hell is what we all deserve because of our sin. On what basis can God pardon me? Not on the basis of things I have done! My sins are too many to number and His Word says my righteous deeds are filthy rags in His sight. Not on the basis of religion, because religion can't save anyone. By these 7 woes, Jesus just showed how empty and impure religion can be. **Psa. 39:6** says, **Surely every man walks in a vain show.** We're all hypocrites to some degree...we're all play actors...this pastor included. But God knows our hearts completely and what He sees there is sufficient to keep us all out of heaven.

Admitting this...confessing our sinfulness...is the first step many refuse to take. But Jesus said, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** Once we face our sinfulness and inability to save ourselves, we then must claim our need of Jesus. We need a Savior.

We need someone with sufficient grace, power and divine authorization to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So we must come to Jesus. We must tell Him we believe He is able to save us. We must ask Him to forgive us and cleanse us and become the Lord of our lives. This is the narrow way...the only way to come to God and be saved. And as **Rom.10:13** promises... **"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** In direct opposition to the philosophy that suggests there are many ways to God, these woes are for everyone who tries to come some way other than Jesus. Have you come God's way. Have you trusted God's Son to save you?