

MATTHEW 23 WOES AGAINST THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS



As we focus on Mt. 23, during Christ's final week, it is vital to link it with the preceding chapter 22, where the Jewish leadership had tried to trap Him with trick questions so they could discredit and if possible, arrest Him. When they failed, they quit asking questions, but Jesus now turns the tables on them by sharply denouncing their flawed and hypocritical spiritual leadership.

Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt. 23:1-12).

They thought they were so good, but Christ exposed their hypocrisy, or religious acting.

As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* points out, "The hypocrisy and unbelief of the nation's religious leaders, evidenced in Mt. 22, prompted a strong message from Jesus. He turned to the crowds and to His disciples, who were in the Temple listening to His debates with the various religious leaders. He warned them about their teachings saying that their *authority* was to be recognized (they sit in Moses' seat, i.e., they teach the Law), but their *practices*, being hypocritical, should not be followed. They placed heavy burdens on people but were not righteous themselves. All their works were performed to be observed by men. Their phylacteries, small leather pouches containing strips of parchment with Old Testament verses (Ex.13:9, 16; Dt. 6:8; 11:18), tied to their left

arms and foreheads, were wide and thus conspicuous. And the tassels of their prayer shawls (Num. 15:38) were long and noticeable. They loved places of honor and to be called Rabbi, implying they were scholars. Such was not to be the attitude of Jesus' followers. Titles (such as Rabbi...father...teacher) and position were not to be sought; instead there should be a brotherly relationship among the disciples (Mt. 23:8).

"Jesus was not saying there would be no lines of authority among them. But He was emphasizing that service for Him--the one Master (*didaskalos*, lit., "teacher") and one Teacher (*kathēgētēs* 'an authoritative guide,' used only here in the N.T.)--was more important than human positions of honor. Leadership positions should never be a goal in and of themselves, but should always be viewed as opportunities to serve others. The Pharisees, who exalted themselves, would be humbled, and Jesus' followers, by humbling themselves in service, would someday be exalted."

Jesus continues, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. 'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it" (Mt. 23:13-22).

Jesus had already denounced the scribes and Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount, but not quite as specifically as He does here.

The Preacher's Bible Commentary notes, "The content of this passage concluded Jesus' public ministry, and also His interchange with the scribes and Pharisees. The passage begins with a message to the crowd about the scribes and Pharisees, exposing them as the false shepherds spoken of by the prophets (Jer. 23; Ezek. 22-23; Amos 7; Zech. 13; Zeph. 3). He exposed them in the Sermon on the Mount as well in His warning about false prophets. He then addressed the leaders directly, and completely unmasked them before the multitude. The seven woes stand in contrast to the statements of blessing in the first 7 Beatitudes."

So, just as He had spoken in the Sermon on the Mount about being "blessed" for seven things, now He gives seven woes. Regarding their leadership, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, "His first denunciation concerned the fact that the Pharisees were preventing others from entering the kingdom. Their antagonism toward Jesus had caused many to turn away from Him. Many Jews were looking to their leaders for direction. Their failure to accept Jesus as Messiah had placed a stumbling block in the paths of their countrymen. For this they stood condemned."

With respect to devouring the widow's houses, *The JFB Commentary* adds, "Taking advantage of the helpless condition and confiding character of 'widows,' they contrived to obtain possession of their property, while by their 'long prayers' they made them believe they were raised far above 'filthy lucre.' So much 'the greater damnation' awaits them. What a lifelike description of the Romish [Roman Catholic] clergy, the true successors of those scribes!"

He had already denounced them about their trickery with vows in the Sermon on the Mount.

Christ continues, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse

the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:23-28).

The Jewish leaders, lacking God's Holy Spirit, didn't know how to properly apply God's laws, so they ended up majoring in the minors and minoring in the majors. As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* adds, "The fourth woe related to the pharisaic practice of meticulously tithing all their possessions. They went so far as to carry the practice down to the smallest spices from plants: mint, dill, and cummin. While meticulously following the Law in this area (Lev. 27:30), they failed to manifest the justice, mercy, and faithfulness demanded by the Law. They were majoring on minors, straining out a gnat, while minoring on majors, swallowing a camel. Being so busy with small details, they never dealt with the important matters. Jesus was not saying tithing was unimportant; He was saying they were completely neglecting the one area at the expense of the other. They should have been doing both. Since they were not, they were blind guides."

Now comes the final denunciation: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you

murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who come in the name of the Lord!'" (Mt. 23:28-39). In a few days, they would fulfill all of this by killing Jesus Christ, the Word in the flesh!

The People's Bible Commentary points out, "The seventh woe also strikes out against externalism. The difference is that the sixth woe castigates the concealment of avarice, whereas the seventh condemns the concealment of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Tombs were whitewashed so that Jewish people would not inadvertently touch them and thus be ceremonially defiled. Jesus likened the scribes and Pharisees to whitewashed tombs, which looked clean on the outside but were full of corruption inside. Men thought that contact with these religious leaders would be sanctifying, but actually it was a defiling experience because they were full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

"The final woe was against what we might label: outward homage, inward homicide. The scribes and Pharisees pretended to honor the O.T. prophets by building and/or repairing their tombs and putting wreaths on their monuments. In memorial speeches, they said they would not have joined their ancestors in killing the prophets. Jesus said to them, 'Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.' But how did they witness this? It almost seems from the preceding verse that they dissociated themselves from their fathers who killed the prophets. First, they admitted that their fathers, of whom they were physical sons, shed the blood of the prophets. But Jesus used the word sons in the sense of meaning people with the same characteristics. He knew that even as they were decorating the prophets' graves, they were plotting His death. Second, in showing such respect for the dead prophets, they were saying, 'The only prophets we like are dead ones.' In this sense also they were sons of their fathers.

"Then Jesus added, 'Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt.' The fathers had filled the cup of murder part way by killing the prophets. The scribes and Pharisees would soon fill it to the brim by killing Jesus and His followers, thus bringing to a terrible climax what their fathers had begun.

"At this point Christ utters those thunderous words, 'Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?' Can the Incarnate Love speak such scathing words? Yes, because true love must also be righteous and holy. The popular conception of Jesus as an innocuous reformer, capable of no emotion but love, is unbiblical. Love can be firm, and must always be just. It is solemn to remember that these words of condemnation were hurled at religious leaders, not at drunkards and reprobates. In an ecumenical age when some evangelical Christians are joining forces with avowed enemies of the cross of Christ, it is good to ponder the example of Jesus, and to remember the words of Jehu to Jehoshaphat, 'Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?' (2 Chr. 19:2).

"Jesus not only foresaw His own death; He plainly told the scribes and Pharisees that they would murder some of the messengers whom He would send—prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some who escaped martyrdom would be scourged in the synagogues and persecuted from city to city. Thus the religious leaders of Israel would heap to themselves the accumulated guilt of the history of martyrdom. Upon them would come all the righteous blood shed on the earth from Abel to Zechariah, whose murder is recorded in 2 Chr. 24:20-21, the last book in the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible. (This is not prophet Zechariah, author of the O.T. book.) The guilt of all the past would come on the generation or race to which Christ was speaking, as if all previous shedding of innocent blood somehow combined and climaxed in the death of the sinless Savior. A torrent of punishment would be poured out on the nation that hated its Messiah without a cause and nailed Him to a criminal's cross."

This was His last discourse with the Jewish leaders before being arrested and killed. It is a warning of what religion can become under a leadership lacking a converted, servant leadership.