

Jesus Condemns the Scribes and Pharisees

by John F. Walvoord

Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and sin, pronouncing seven woes upon them and warning of the consequences of their actions.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:1, Ezekiel 36:26, Matthew 23:3-37, Romans 11:25, Revelation 14:1

Topics: "Hypocrisy Exposed", "Gods Judgment"

Description

John F. Walvoord delivers a sermon on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, where Jesus warns about their false teachings and outward righteousness while lacking true holiness and mercy. Jesus pronounces seven woes upon the scribes and Pharisees, condemning their blocking of others from the kingdom of God, their greed, trickery, hypocrisy, and persecution of prophets. Despite the severe judgment pronounced, Jesus laments over Jerusalem, expressing God's desire for their salvation and the future hope of a generation turning back to the Lord. The sermon concludes with a message of restoration and revival for Israel, as prophesied in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Transcript

Hypocrisy of the Pharisees, 23:1-12

Jesus, at this time, was thronged with pilgrims from all over Israel who had come to celebrate the Passover feast. Addressing Himself to them and to His own disciples, Jesus solemnly warned them concerning the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mk 12:38-40; Lk 20:45-47). This discourse, as a whole, is found only in Matthew. Jesus began by acknowledging that they were seated in Moses' seat. While not saying it in so many words, He implied that they were usurpers who were not truly successors of Moses. But nevertheless, their position must be recognized. Accordingly, He told them, "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do" (23:3).

By commanding them to observe and do what the Pharisees instructed them, Jesus certainly did not mean that they should follow the false teachings of the Pharisees but rather those teachings that naturally and correctly arose from the Law of Moses. In general, the Pharisees were upholders of the law and should be recognized for this.

Jesus went on immediately, however, to point out their hypocrisy and commanded the people, "But do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not" (v. 3). He then cited the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They lay heavy burdens upon the people but would not do anything to make the load lighter. Their own works were

done to be observed by men rather than God. They made broad their phylacteries, the Scriptures which they customarily bound to their forehead and to their left wrist, containing the Scriptures of Exodus 13:3-16; Deuteronomy 6:5-9 and 11:13-21. This they did, not only when they prayed in the morning, but throughout the day, for the purpose of being seen of men. They also enlarged the borders of their garments, the tassels referred to in Deuteronomy 22:12, which were tokens that they were holy men.

Jesus charged the Pharisees with loving the best places at the feasts and the chief seats in the synagogue. They loved to be called rabbi, which recognized that they were teachers and scholars. Jesus reminded them that their Messiah, "Christ," was their Master, and God was their Father. It is of interest that He referred to the Christ, or the Messiah, in Matthew 23:8, 10. What He was saying was that the Pharisees and scribes had forgotten the preeminence of God and of their Messiah.

This condemnation by Jesus of the pretensions of the scribes and Pharisees does not rule out reasonable recognition of authority in Israel or in the church, but obviously prohibits making this a goal in itself. He held before them instead the desirability of being a servant, or one who ministers, and He concluded, "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (v. 12). His disciples were not to seek to be called rabbi and were forbidden to use the word father indiscriminately, even though Paul used father correctly in 1 Corinthians 4:15, and John addressed fathers in 1 John 2: 13-14. The general teaching is clear. They were not to seek man-exalting titles such as rabbi, father, or minister to gain the recognition of men. Disciples of Christ should not exalt themselves but should seek to serve others and leave the exalting to God Himself.

Jesus Pronounces Seven Woes Upon the Scribes and Pharisees, 23:13-36

In this section, climaxing the controversy of Christ with the scribes and Pharisees, seven solemn woes are pronounced upon them. Only Matthew records this scathing denunciation of these religious leaders of the Jews. These woes, in contrast to the Beatitudes, denounce false religion as utterly abhorrent to God and worthy of severe condemnation. No passage in the Bible is more biting, more pointed, or more severe than this pronouncement of Christ upon the Pharisees. It is significant that He singled them out, as opposed to the Sadducees, who were more liberal, and the Herodians, who were the politicians. The Pharisees, while attempting to honor the Word of God and manifesting an extreme form of religious observance, were actually the farthest from God.

His first condemnation, in 23:13, related to the fact that they did all they could to shut out others. False religion and pretense are always the worst enemies of the truth and are far more dangerous than immorality or indifference. As the religious leaders of the Jews, they were held guilty before God of blocking the way for others seeking to enter into the kingdom of God.

In verse 14, another woe is indicated, in which the scribes and Pharisees were charged with devouring widows' houses and making long prayers to impress others. The verse, however, is omitted in most manuscripts and probably should not be considered as rightly a portion of this Scripture. It may have been inserted from Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47.¹¹⁷ If it is included, it would bring the total woes to eight instead of seven.

In Matthew 23:15, the second woe is mentioned. In this one, the Pharisees were described as extremely energetic on both land and sea to make proselytes of the Jewish religion. But when they were successful, Jesus charged, "Ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." In referring to hell, Christ used the word Geenna or Gehenna, a reference to eternal damnation, rather than to Hades, the

temporary abode of the wicked in the intermediate state. The Pharisees and their proselytes both would end up in eternal damnation.

A third woe is mentioned in verse 16, based on the trickery of the Pharisees, who held that swearing by the gold of the temple bound the oath. Jesus denounced them as both fools and blind, as obviously the gold was meaningless unless it was sanctified by the temple, and the gift on the altar was meaningless unless it was given significance by the altar. Repeating His accusation, He declared in verse 19, "Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?" Accordingly, Christ concluded that an oath based on the temple was binding, just as an oath based on heaven carried with it the significance of the throne of God and God who sits on the throne.

The fourth woe, mentioned in verse 23, has to do with hypocrisy in tithing. While they were so concerned in paying the tithe down to the smallest spice or seed, they omitted the really important matters: obeying the law and manifesting mercy and faith. He repeated His charge that they were blind, straining out a gnat or a small insect, but swallowing a camel. He was, of course, speaking figuratively of their dealing with minutiae but omitting the really important things.

The fifth woe is pronounced in verse 25, where He repeated the charge that they were hypocrites, merely actors acting a part. He charged them with cleaning the outside of the cup and the platter but being unconcerned about what was inside, where cleanliness really matters. He meant by this that they were concerned with ceremonial cleanliness, that which men observed, but not really concerned with holiness. While observing ceremonial rites of cleansing, they were not above extortion and excess.

In verse 27, Jesus mentioned the sixth woe. In this one, He described them as whited sepulchres, graves that had been made beautiful and white on the outside but within were full of dead men's bones. This illustrated that the Pharisees were outwardly righteous but inwardly full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Jesus concluded with the seventh woe, in verse 29, in which He charged them with building tombs of the prophets and garnishing them with decorations and claiming that they would not be partakers with their fathers in martyring prophets. Jesus called their very witness to account, that they were the children of those who killed the prophets, and He told them, in verse 32, "Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers." In other words, do what your fathers did and even do worse. Jesus was, of course, referring to their intent to kill Him and to their later persecution of the church.

In the severest terms, in verse 33, Jesus addressed them, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" He described the scribes and Pharisees as poisonous snakes, destined for terrible judgment which would be theirs in hell, specifically Gehenna, the place of eternal punishment.

Jesus declared, in verse 34, that He would send to them prophets, wise men, and scribes who were also believers. Some of them they would persecute, some they would scourge and drive out of the synagogue, and others they would kill and crucify. Their works would justify bringing upon them the just condemnation coming from all the righteous blood shed upon the earth from the time of righteous Abel, killed by Cain (Gen 4:8), to the martyrdom of Zacharias, the son of Barachias (2 Ch 24:20-22). Zacharias, mentioned as the son of Jehoiada in 2 Chronicles 24:20, probably was the grandson of the priest and Barachias was his actual father. Richard Glover, in his outline of Matthew 23, summarizes the characteristics of hypocrisy in these words, "Hypocrisy is a hard taskmaster...lives only for the praise of men...concerns itself with the small things of religion...deals with externals chiefly...reveres only what is dead...finds a fearful judgment."¹¹⁸

The present sad chapter in the days of Israel's apostasy was the climax of the religious rulers' long rejection of the things of God. Jesus solemnly pronounced that all these acts of rejection of God and His prophets would cause judgment to come upon this generation, which they would bring to culmination by their rejection of God's only Son. This prophecy was tragically fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the children of Israel over the face of the earth. Jerusalem, the city of God, and the magnificent temple, the center of their worship, were to lay in ashes as an eloquent reminder that divine judgment on hypocrisy and sin is inevitable.

Lament over Jerusalem, 23:37-39

Probably no words of Jesus in His public ministry are more eloquent than the words recorded in Matthew of Christ's lament over Jerusalem (cf. His earlier lament over Jerusalem, Lk 19:41-44). Here is revealed the breaking heart of God over a people whom God loved, and yet a people who spurned that love and killed those whom God sent to them. The chapter that holds the most severe indictment of any of the discourses of Christ "ends in sobs and tears," as Criswell describes it.¹¹⁹ Jesus declared, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Mt 23:37). The repetition of the address to Jerusalem signifies the deep emotion in which Jesus spoke, and can be compared to repetitions of similar character in Samuel 18:33, where Absalom is so addressed; Jesus' repeated address to Martha in Luke 10:41; and the call to Saul in Acts 9:4.

Jerusalem, which means "city of peace," was the scene where the blood of the prophets was spilled, and stones were cast at those who brought a message of love. Both the verbs for "killest" and "stonest" are present tense, speaking of habitual or characteristic action. Again and again, prophets had been killed and stoned, and the end was not yet. The figure of a hen, or any mother bird, connotes a brood of young gathering under protective wings, a familiar image in the Bible (Deu 32:11; Ps 17:8; 61:4).

How tragic the words, "Ye would not!" It was God's desire to save them, but it was their will to turn away. There was nothing left but to pronounce judgment, and Jesus did this in Matthew 23:38, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." By "house," undoubtedly He was referring to the city. It could, however, also relate to the nation itself, which was to suffer severely in dispersion over the world. The expression left desolate is contained in a simple verb meaning to be left alone. How alone is a city, a nation, or an individual from whom God has departed.

Even in the midst of this gloom and condemnation, however, a ray of light is given in verse 39, when Jesus said, "For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." The generation to whom He was speaking was indeed to be left desolate, tragically alone, but there was hope for a future generation, a generation which would turn once again to the Lord. With these words, Jesus closed His last public discourse and left the temple for the last time (cf. Mt 24:1).

Moses had written long ago in Deuteronomy 30:1-3, "And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee." Moses went on to predict their regathering and their possession of the land (Deu 30:4-5). In Deuteronomy 30:6, he stated "And the Lord thy God will

circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul, that thou mayest live."

Other references to the same revival in the Old Testament are frequently found. The closing chapters of the prophecies of Isaiah mention again and again the coming revival of Israel, as, for instance, in Isaiah 65:18-25. Jeremiah, in like manner, prophesies Israel's future restoration in Jeremiah 30:1-11; 31:1-14, 27-37. Zechariah speaks of it in chapter 8, and 12:10; 13:1; 14:9-21. The New Testament picks up similar truth in Romans 11:25-36 and pictures Israel triumphant on Mount Zion in Revelation 14:1-5. While it is tragic that Israel did not know the day of her visitation at the time of the first coming of Christ, the godly remnant of Israel, that awaits His second coming to sit on the throne of David, will experience the blessing of the Lord and receive a new heart and a new spirit, of which Ezekiel spoke in Ezekiel 36:23-28.

The tragic note which ends Matthew 23 introduces the great prophecy of the end of the age, recorded in Matthew 24-25 and delivered privately to His disciples. This discourse details the prophecy of the coming kingdom and the time of reward and blessing for those who trust in the Lord.

117 Cf. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 217.

118 Richard Glover, *A Teacher's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 259, 263-65.

119 W. A. Criswell, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 129.

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