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Eight Woes (Matthew 23)

By Bryan Hodge

It had been a day of questions. First, the Pharisees questioned Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22). Their question was not sincere, but it was designed to "entangle him in his talk" (Matthew 22:15). Then, the Sadducees questioned him about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). Finally, the Pharisees questioned Jesus about which commandment was greatest (Matthew 22:34-40). He answered each question perfectly. They "marveled" (Matthew 22:22), "were astonished at his teaching" (Matthew 22:33), and one scribe even exclaimed "well said teacher. You have spoken the truth" (Mark 12:32).

Following these attempts to find fault with him, Jesus begins a stern rebuke of these hypocrites. Let us notice...

1. "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" (Matthew 23:13).

It is very bad to reject Christ and his kingdom. Jesus warned, "He who rejects my words, has that which judges him - the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48).

However, these men did not just reject the message themselves. They went beyond this. They kept others from receiving the message. They did this by their: influence (John 7:46-48), words (Mark 3:22), and intimidation (John 7:13, 48; 9:22; 12:42-43). Later bribery (Matthew 28:11-15) and force (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16) would be used.

Application: Are we a spiritual hindrance to others? Jesus warned, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

2. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation" (Matthew 23:14).

They used religion to fleece the people, especially the weak (cf. 1 Timothy 6:5; Titus 1:10-11; 2 Peter 2:3). Burt Groves commented, "One cannot be sure how they stole from the widows. Possible, they pretended to help the widows while really helping themselves to their property" (The Gospel According to Luke, p. 214).

Application: How do we treat the weak? "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

3. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrite! 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" (Matthew 23:15).

They were evangelistic. Their teachings produced men even more evil than themselves. "Justin Martyr observes, that 'the proselyte did not only disbelieve Christ's doctrine, but were abundantly more blasphemous against him than the Jews themselves, endeavoring to torment and cut off Christians where ever they could; they being the instruments of the scribes and Pharisees (A. Clark Vol. 5, p. 220).

Application: What type of converts are we making? "Let each one take heed how he builds... If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him" (1 Corinthians 3:10, 17). Teaching is serious business. "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1).

4. "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" (Matthew 23:16).

They had created a way to deceive. Some types of oaths they considered binding, and others as nothing - it all depended on the exact wording used in the oath (Matthew 5:33-37; 23:16-22; James 5:12).

Application: Are we people whose word can be trusted? Or, do we say, "Yes, I said that, but we did not shake on it." or, "Yes, I said that, but I had my fingers crossed when I said it." Paul instructed, "Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one speak truth with his neighbor'" (Ephesians 4:25).

5. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites: For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin 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" (Matthew 23:23).

They were sticklers about keeping the small details of the law, yet they missed the greater principles. The problem was not their attention to detail. The problem was their neglect of bigger principles.

Application: Do we do this? If we go through the acts of worship in proper doctrinal form, and maintain proper church organization, but neglect love and mercy what does it profit? (1 Corinthians 13:1-3; James 2:13).

6. "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25).

They focused on external actions more than internal purity. They worshipped God, but their hearts were far from Him (Matthew 15:1, 8). They preached against murder and adultery, but not hate and lust (Matthew 5:16, 21-22, 27-28). They did what they did, not to serve God, but to be seen of men (Matthew 23:5a; Matthew 5:20 cf. 6:1, 5, and 16).

Application: What about us? God cares not just about our actions, but also our motives (Matthew 6:1-4, 5-6, 16-18). Are we genuine in our Christianity, or is it just a show before others?

7. "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" (Matthew 23:27).

This is explained in the next verse. They "outwardly appeared righteous to men, but inside (were) full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28).

Application: Does our public image and true character match? It is possible for us to fool some people, but we cannot fool God. He knows us. We can put on our "Sunday best" suit or dress. However, such will not hide our true state from God.

8. "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, 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" (Matthew 23:32, 34).

They could easily see the sins of others, but they failed to see their own weaknesses and sins. In truth, they were much like those who had rejected the prophets of old.

Application: What do we think of when we hear about the sins of those of old? We each need to take a long close look into the mirror, the perfect law of liberty (James 1:22-25). Haddon Robinson has written, "A congregation convenes as a jury not to convict Judas, Peter, or Solomon, but to judge themselves" (Biblical Preaching, p. 27).