

JESUS' WARNING TO THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Eight Woes of Condemnation

Matthew 23:13-33

Scripture *highly honors genuine spiritual leaders* who *rightly* and *faithfully* live a life that *represents* God and *seeks no glory* for themselves. God lifts up His *true servants* and presents them as examples for others to *follow* and *respect*.

“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work...”

~I Thessalonians 5:12-13

On the other hand, no one in Scripture is more *condemned* than the *religious fraud* who *teaches* and *practices untruth*. God's most *furious wrath* is reserved for those men who parade themselves as a *servant of God* but who in reality are *servants* only of *evil* and a *lie*.

Throughout the *history of redemption*, the *greatest threat* to *God's truth* and *God's work* has been *false prophets* and *teachers*...because they *presumed to speak* in His name. That's why the Lord's most *scathing denunciations* were reserved for the *false teachers of Israel*... who claimed to *speak* and *act* for God...but were *liars*.

Here in **Matthew 23**, Jesus relentlessly *condemned* the *false spiritual leaders* of **Israel**...in particular, the *scribes* and *Pharisees*...who held the *dominant power* and *influence* in Judaism.

In this *final public message*, the Lord wanted to *draw the people away from* those *false leaders* and *turn them to* the *true teaching* and the *godly examples* of His apostles.

I. THE WOE OF DECEPTION: (**vs. 13**) A *false religion* that *deceives* people and therefore *prevents* them from entering God's kingdom.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (vs. 13)...

Woe...Gk. *ouai*, it isn't so much a word in the ordinary sense but *expresses an outcry of anger, pain, or both*.

Hypocrites...Gk. *hupokrites*, refers to *actors who put on a false front...who pretend*.

The picture Jesus gives here suggests the idea of the **scribes and Pharisees** standing just *outside the gates* of the **kingdom of heaven** and *slamming the gates shut* in the faces of those who were *about to go in*.

An example of this was when **John the Baptist** was proclaiming *the kingdom of heaven was at hand*...when many men and women from **Jerusalem** went out to *hear him* and *repented* and were *baptized*. Soon the *unbelieving* and *unrepentant Pharisees* and **Sadducees** showed up and *confused* and *intimidated* the people by *corrupting John's* message.

The *false religious leaders* in **Israel** *misinterpreted* the Word of God by *denying the Messiah*...by *denying the need for repentance*...and by *denying salvation by grace*. Their *works righteousness system* had no place for the *gospel of grace*...which is the *only way* into *God's kingdom*. By *drawing people away* from Jesus Christ...those leaders were literally *directing people away* from their *salvation* and confirming their *damnation*.

This is what we see today with *Mormonism*. They preach a *different* Jesus. They use the same *religious terms* that we use... but their terms have a *different meaning* than what Scripture teaches.

Every *non-Christian religion* is a *works-righteous religion*...and *works righteousness* is in *direct contrast* with the *gospel of God's grace*. By their very nature such belief systems *prevent* and *exclude* people from God's kingdom.

II. THE WOE OF PRETENSION: (**vs. 14**)

This **woe** isn't found in the best early manuscript of **Matthew** (as indicated by the brackets that encase it in the **NASB**) and was probably added later by a well-meaning *scribe* who picked it up from **Mark 12:40** or **Luke 20:47**. Although the statement is genuine, it wasn't likely a part of this passage.

[Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] (vs. 14)...This **woe** demonstrated the *pretense* and *inconsistency* of the

religious leaders. For they made **long prayers** to *impress* people with their *spirituality*...but they also *oppressed* widows, whom they should have been helping.

III. THE WOE OF DISTORTION: (vs. 15) They *distorted* the *true gospel* and *taught a false gospel* of *legalism* and *performance*.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves (vs. 15)...

This **woe** addressed the *zealous activity* of the religious leaders because they *actively* and *aggressively traveled* not only over **land**...but also over the **sea** to make even a single *convert*.

In New Testament times, a great effort was being made to *convert Gentiles* to **Judaism**. They worked aggressively to **make one proselyte**. The word **proselyte** had the basic meaning of *a person who was an outsider being brought into a religion*.

The problem with this was that by their actions, these religious leaders were *condemning* many individuals to *eternal damnation*. By imposing *external restrictions* of *rabbinic traditions* on their converts, they were preventing these people from seeing the *truth*.

In fact, such a convert became **twice as much a son of hell** as the *Pharisees*. Sometimes these converts *surpassed* their mentors in *fanatical zeal* and because their *zeal* wasn't godly...it simply led them to become *twice as hellish* as the *Pharisees*.

IV. THE WOE OF PERVERSION: (vs. 16-22) For *perverting* the *truth*.

In the first *three woes*, Jesus spoke of the religious leaders' *effects on others*...in the next *five woes*, He spoke of the religious leaders own *character* and *actions*.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? **And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.'** You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the

altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. (vs. 16-22)...When taking *oaths*, they made *fine lines of distinction* that could possibly allow them to *invalidate* their *oaths*. While they appeared to be making a *binding oath*... *inwardly* they had *no intention of keeping it*.

Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated...Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated...Jesus said that they were wrong in suggesting that **gold** was **more important** than the **temple** and that an **offering** was **more important** than the **altar**. Jesus pointed out that any oath based on the **temple** or *things in it* was binding...for behind the **temple** was the One who *dwelt* in it.

This was parallel to making an oath by God's **throne**...for that oath was also binding because of the One who sat on the **throne**.

And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it...Such distinctions by the religious leaders were condemned by Jesus, for they were clearly *deceiving* and *dishonest*.

Jesus *denounced* those leaders as **blind guides (vs. 16, 24)**...**fools (vs. 17)**...and **blind men (vs. 17, 19)**...and **blind Pharisees (vs. 26)**.

V. THE WOE OF INVERSION: (vs.23-24) They *inverted* divine priorities. They *magnified* the *insignificant* and *minimized* the *essential*.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (vs. 23-24)...The *fifth woe* relates 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 such as...**mint and dill and cummin**.

While meticulously following the **Law** in this area (**Leviticus 27:30**), they failed to manifest the **justice** and **mercy** and **faithfulness** demanded by the **Law**. They were *majoring* on the *minors*... *straining out* a *gnat*...while *minoring* on the *majors*...*swallowing* a **camel**. Being so busy with small details...they never dealt with the important matters.

Jesus wasn't saying *tithing* wasn't important...He was saying they were completely **neglecting** the *one area* at the *expense* of the *other*. They *should have been doing both*. Since they weren't... they were **blind guides** (the **blind** leading the **blind**).

VI. THE WOE OF **CORRUPTION**: (vs. 25-26)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also (vs. 25-26)...

The *sixth* woe emphasized the *hypocritical nature* of the **Pharisees**. They were concerned with *external cleanliness*, such as **the outside of the cup and of the dish** from which they would *eat*. But their *hearts* were *greedy*...**full of robbery and self-indulgence**. Their *cleansing* was primarily *for the sake of being seen by men*. But they weren't above *corruption* and *excesses* in their own lives. If *cleansing* would have taken place *internally*... their **outside** would also have been affected.

VII. THE WOE OF **CONTAMINATION**: (vs. 27-28)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (vs. 27-28)...

In the *seventh* woe Jesus continued the thought of the previous statement about *external purification*. The *sixth* woe stressed their *actions*...the *seventh*, their *appearance*. He called the **scribes and Pharisees**...**whitewashed tombs**.

A custom of that day was to keep **tombs** painted *white* on the **outside** so that they would **appear beautiful**. But on the **inside** of the **tombs** was the *decaying flesh* of *dead people*. Similarly, while

the **Pharisees** appeared **righteous** on the **outside**...they were *corrupt* and *decaying* on the **inside**. They were **full of hypocrisy and lawlessness**.

Lawlessness...Gk. *anomias*, it doesn't mean *the absence of the Law*...but a *violation of the Law*...a *transgression*.

VIII. THE WOE OF **POSTURING**: (vs. 29-33)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? (vs. 29-33)...

The final woe also emphasized the religious leaders' *hypocrisy*. They spent time *building tombs* and *decorating the monuments of the righteous*...and they were quick to *say* that if they *had been living* in the *time of the prophets*...they would *never have been involved in shedding the blood* of these *righteous men*.

Yet, Jesus knew that they were already in the *process of planning* His *death*. By that very act, they would demonstrate that they were just like the former generation who **murdered the prophets**.

By rejecting *THE Prophet*...they would be following in the *foot-steps* of their **fathers** and *filling up* the *measure of the guilt* of their **fathers' sin**.

Fill up...often used in Scripture in relation to *sin*, *wrath*, and *judgment* when those have *reached their full limit*. It depicts a cup *filled to the brim with sin*...which becomes a cup of *condemnation*.

CONCLUSION: The Final Warning (vs. 34-36)

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and 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, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you

murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (vs. 34-36)...

In *severe language* Jesus *condemned* the religious leaders. The evidence that they were *deserving of hell* would be their *continual rejection of truth*.

The Lord promised to send them **prophets and wise men and scribes**...but the religious leaders would *reject their words* and even **kill** some and **crucify** others and **scourge** and *pursue* others **from city to city**. Their response to the *proclaimed truth* would justify the *judgment* coming on them.

In other words...after they **crucified** Jesus, their Messiah...they would proceed to **kill** and **crucify** His followers...especially the godly men He would send as His *emissaries* (His *ambassadors* and *messengers*).

Abel was the *first righteous martyr* mentioned in Scripture (**Genesis 4:8**) and **Zechariah** was the *last martyr* (**II Chronicles 24:20-22**). That **generation** of Jews...those who were guilty of following their **blind leaders**...would face God's *most severe judgment* for their involvement in *shedding innocent blood*.

The Lord was anticipating the nation's continuing rejection of the gospel. Their refusal of the Messiah ultimately led to the destruction of the *Temple* in **70 A.D.**

LESSONS WE CAN LEARN:

- Christianity isn't a performance based religion. It isn't a religion for show. It's all about God and His grace.
- God is a loving God...but He is also a just God. He will by no means let the guilty go unpunished.
- The Church today must be discerning and be willing to expose false teachers who are deceiving people and leading them to eternal destruction.