

Jesus' Sermon of Seven Woes

(The Missing Elements of False Faith)

Matthew 23

Kingdom Come! (Gospel of Matthew Series)

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Sunday, November 29, 2015, 10:30am at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois
livinghopechurch.net

“A hypocrite [is the one who] wants to impress others with an external façade of religious piety that he knows is devoid of internal spiritual substance.”

– Sam Storms

Announcements

1. Welcome to visitors
2. Expositor's class, 4pm and evening service, 5pm / decorating after PM service.
3. We will have Phil Soen in to preach Dec. 13.
4. Next week we begin a short series for the Advent season, called “Advent in the Prophets.” Next week's message will be about those who opposed the Birth of Christ. And we will study the entire book of Obadiah.
5. New Members class beginning in January.

If you don't have a Bible, there should be one in the seat in front of you. Open your Bible to **Matthew 23**. We are continuing in our series in the book of Matthew entitled “Kingdom Come.” This morning we are looking at a message entitled: “The Sermon of Seven Woes.”

Playing Games

How many people like to play basketball? Did you know there's a difference between enjoying a game and actually knowing how to play it skillfully? If you go anywhere in the world, people like to play games, whether its soccer or UNO, or checkers or dominoes. Lots of people liked watching the Olympic Games last summer. People love to play games. Those of us with children love to watch our children play games.

A.W. Tozer was a pastor in Chicago during the 1950s and 60s. Here's something Tozer said, “Most people indeed play at religion as they play at other games.” Religion itself being the most universally played game. I hope that's not true among us. Yet I believe there is Pharisaism in all of us that we need to confront so that we can be more like Jesus.

We want Living Hope Bible Church not to be a place to play games, but a place of shelter and security and acceptance for sinners. You need to know that we are a church made up of broken, hurting people on the road to restoration in Jesus Christ. If we don't think we fit that description then we are nothing more than people comparing masks with one another. It's all a

show. "Well my mask is better than your mask". No, we are all hurting people. Let's admit it. Let's come clean today.

In Matthew 23, Jesus reserves His harshest words to those who were playing games with Christianity.

The Problem with Superficial Faith

Jesus reserves His fiercest sermon for the Pharisees and leaders of Israel. In it He condemns superficial faith. It cannot save or sanctify. It's not the real thing.

Robot Illustration

We all prize authenticity. You know robots are becoming more and more human. They are fantastic in all they can do. I went over to a local engineering plant, and they have all these automatons doing the most amazing and precise work in engineering. They are robots. They can do things better than human beings. But they are not human beings. Imagine your son bringing home a robot – dad, she's the one! No, she's a robot.

That's a way of illustrating the absurdity of mechanical Christianity. Sometimes we can do things to well, we even want to improve upon the Holy Spirit. Our children don't need mechanical Christianity. Anyone can put on imitation Christianity. Our children need to see us loving and worshipping the living God.

Cardboard Cutout of the Rich and Powerful

Have you ever seen a cardboard cutout of someone who was rich and famous? Imagine if I told you we were going to have R. C. Sproul here next week, and then next week comes, and I bring you a cardboard cutout. It's not really him. It's funny for a picture, but it's just a cardboard cutout. What our kids need to see is not a cardboard cutout of Christianity, but the real thing.

Jesus is clear in verses 1-12 that superficial faith is powerless. The only thing that will bring us into a relationship with the Lord is humble faith.

Introduction: Humble Faith is the Goal, vs. 1-12

Jesus Christ gives a sermon to His enemies in Matthew 23. The essence of what He says is: "Get off the throne of your life. Stop pretending you know me with superficial faith. Humble yourself." He tells us in verses 1-12 how to have the true faith. It means you have to know your own helplessness and humble yourself.

Be humble and admit that you cannot provide any meaningful salvation to anyone. Jesus is exposing and unmasking the Pharisees who were like theatre actors, hypocrites. They acted like they knew the Lord, but it was just that, an act.

They had the externals of a true believer, but they were nothing more than good religious actors who were actually enemies of God.

Pharisees Exalted Themselves

In Matthew 23, Jesus censured the scribes and Pharisees for exalting themselves. The religious leaders did not have servant hearts. They did not want to serve anyone. They wanted to be served by everyone. They were not interested in being humbled, only in being exalted. They could pretend to be humble followers while at the same time exalting themselves.

By contrast, the very essence of the work of Jesus was His voluntary submission to humiliation. His food was to be obedient, to do the will of the Father (John 4: 34). He humbled

Himself and took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2: 5– 8). For this reason, “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 9–11).

The Goal: Humble Faith

Matthew 23:1-12 is kind of an introduction to the fiercest sermon our Lord ever preached. This is the antithesis of the Beatitudes. There Jesus extols the blessings of humble faith. In this sermon, Jesus condemns and curses hypocritical faith. Look at the missing elements of hypocritical faith in verses 1-12:

Matthew 23:1-10, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.”

Pastoral Hypocrites

- had great knowledge / sound teaching (they sit on Moses seat), but used it for themselves
- took advantage of people, manipulating them with burdens they would never bear (vs. 4)
- did all things to be seen by others (vs. 5)
- drew attention to themselves with their clothing (vs. 5)
- exalt themselves at meals and at church (vs. 6) and at market (vs. 7)
- have exalted titles (vs. 7-10)

Humbled Now / Exalted Later

We have a wonderful promise here: If we follow Jesus' example and humble ourselves now, we will be exalted later. **Matthew 23:10-12**, “Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant.¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” However, He also gives a warning: If we exalt ourselves now, we will be humbled later. Because the scribes and Pharisees were so committed to exalting themselves, Jesus had oracles of woe for them...¹

The Distance of False Converts

What we see are seven woes to empty faith. Strangely, there are people and even ministers who attend church, teach the Bible, and serve in the congregation who do not know Christ. They are distant. These Pharisees were false converts offering a false faith.

¹ Sproul, R. C. (2013-02-28). Matthew (St. Andrew's Expository Commentary) (Kindle Locations 10133-10141). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

In Jesus' sermon, we see seven missing elements from the Pharisees' faith. They are therefore condemned. They could not have true faith because of their pride. They wanted to be exalted. They created their own faith with themselves at the center of their own lives.

Outline

False teachers have no deliverance to offer. Superficial faith offers...

1. No Salvation (shut the kingdom) – Doorway to Change – by grace through faith
2. No Mediator (two fold children of hell) – Agent of Change, Holy Spirit
3. No Sanctification/Morality (deceit in oaths) – Process of Change, Pleasing God
4. No Compassion (strict on money, but sloth on mercy) – Focus of Change, God's People
5. No Satisfaction (Indulgence) – Fuel for Change, Christ and His Word
6. No Transformation (Inside Dead Men's bones) – Nature of Change, Regeneration
7. No Savior (Kill the prophets) – Pathway to Change, Jesus Christ

Who is at the Center of your Life?

Who is at the center of your life? Is Christ your All in all? Is He your reason for getting up in the morning? Are you close to Him?

My desire for you this morning is that you will live close to Jesus and let Him do what only He can do.

Trying to serve God on your own is vain. You cannot save yourself. In Jesus' seven condemnations, we find the seven missing elements that reveals a superficial faith. Jesus says this kind of false faith is lamentable. He cries out 7 woes of perfect condemnation.

Woe! Divine Judgement is Here!

“Woe” (οὐαί) generally means divine judgment is on the people.² It could also signify an utterance of shame. This is certainly part of the meaning but does not exhaust Jesus' deep sentiment here.³

A Lament of Shame!

This is not just a condemnation (though it is for those rejecting Christ). It is also a lament. Jesus (as we see in vs. 37-39) loves these people in spite of their rebellion!

In essence, Jesus is saying: “How lamentable! How shameful! You Scribes and Pharisees! Keep going like this and you will most surely perish!”

I. Superficial faith offers no salvation, vs. 13

Woe to the Hypocrites

Matthew 23:13a, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!...”

First, Jesus calls the Scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites” is a word that means ‘theatre actors’ (23:13). Obviously their false faith majored on the externals. The salvation that Jesus brings is an internal salvation that changes the heart. But the Pharisees were good at putting on religious masks and costumes.

² Osborne, G. R. (2010). *Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 847). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ K. C. Hanson, “How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and Reproaches,” *Semeia* 68 (1994): 81–111

They were good at “putting on a false face” and pretending to be what they are not, for glory and praise and esteem from man rather than living a life to please God.⁴

This passage of seven woes became popular after the printing press was invented. It really set people free. After the Reformation and the advent of printing, the Bible could be read by common people and **the woes** began to have great influence. At that time the metaphorical use of “Pharisee” as “hypocrite” became widespread.

Satan Puts on a Mask

Remember Satan masquerades as an angel of light. His desire is to distract you from the fact that there is no salvation in mere external religion. Jesus works in the heart first.

As Christians, we must not be hypocrites. We must major on the heart, not merely on the outside. Why is this so vital? Because merely correcting external things cannot offer any salvation. There must be an internal change. Look at this in verse 13.

No Entrance into Heaven

Matthew 23:13b, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”

By emphasizing the external, and not the internal the Pharisees were shutting the only doorway to eternal life. There is no salvation in external religion. Unless you have drawn near to God through Christ, you cannot enter the kingdom. You must be born again.

Shutting the Door

Jesus is saying, “Woe! Lament! Because I want to do a work in the interior of the hearts of my people, but the very door that will give them entrance, you shut!”

What is Jesus saying? The teachers and pastors are not applying God's Word. They only way to have a true work of faith done in your heart is by “hearing the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

We should be like Ezra and Nehemiah who “gave the sense” of the Word of God, translating the Word into Aramaic and applying the Word to the hearts of God's people.

Without Heart Change, No Entrance into God's Kingdom

Mere superficial faith is dangerous. If we do not **apply God's Word** properly, people will resort to theatre acting in the Christian life. External theatre acting is a sad substitute for intimacy with God. How can wretched sinners enter the Kingdom to have intimacy with God if there is no heart change? Without heart change there is **no entrance into God's Kingdom**.

The Pharisees Teaching Prohibited Conversion

The idea of “entering” the kingdom refers to conversion. The opposition by these leaders to God's Messiah has made it impossible not only for themselves but also for all who hope to enter the kingdom by following their teaching.⁵ Why? Because they do not teach God's Word in a way

⁴ Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 137) tells how after the Reformation and the advent of printing, the Bible could be read by common people and the woes began to have great influence. At that time the metaphorical use of “Pharisee” as “hypocrite” became widespread.

⁵ Osborne, 848.

that points to Christ. They do not apply it **internally** to the heart, but only **externally** to the behavior.

Are You a Door Opener?

As a citizen of God's kingdom, every believer ought to be one who opens the door of the kingdom to others. All saints have the keys of the kingdom, which is the saving gospel of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:19), and every false teacher takes away the key of knowledge that leads to the kingdom (Luke 11:52).⁶

II. Superficial faith offers no mediator (Agent of change) vs. 15

Children of Hell cannot Conform to Christ

Matthew 23:15, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

D.L. Moody said, "There is no better evangelist in the world than the Holy Spirit." He also said, "No man can resolve himself into Heaven" – you need the Holy Spirit.

Someone asked him how he won so many converts. He replied, "I have had more trouble with **myself** than with any other **man** I have ever met." He said (I paraphrase): *If a man does not change, you can be sure I have won him. But if he begins to change to be like Christ, he is a convert of the Lord.*

All is Vain without the Spirit

We don't want to win anyone to ourselves, amen? We want to win them to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. "*All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down!*"

Sanctification through the Agent of Change: the Holy Spirit

Any lasting change must come from the Holy Spirit. Remember **2 Thess. 2:13**, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth." No lasting change comes except by the Spirit through the Word.

There is no agent of change, no mediator of change but the Holy Spirit.

Evangelism to Make One Proselyte

In the first century there was an unprecedented zeal for proselytizing Gentiles, but their aim was wrong. They didn't just want to win people for the kingdom of God, but to their version of Judaism, to *Pharisaism*. Jesus remarked on this zeal. He said, "You travel land and sea to win one proselyte."⁷

The Big Problem

The big problem was the Holy Spirit wasn't involved. They would have said that they believed in God's grace, but that they also had to keep the Law and be a good Jew. They misapplied the Word of God. But they also **lacked the power** of the great **Transformer of souls**, the Holy Spirit.

⁶ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 23:13). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁷ Sproul, R. C. (2013-02-28). *Matthew* (St. Andrew's Expositional Commentary) (Kindle Locations 10189-10191). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

You and I Cannot Make Godly Converts

We are powerless to make converts. We plant and water, but it is God who gives the increase. We teach and apply God's Word, but it is the Spirit that makes us conformed into the image of Christ.

These Pharisees and teachers of the law were unconverted. They could only make followers of themselves, and not of Yahweh. We find out here that Jesus considered these legalistic rule makers, *children of hell*.

Two Kinds of Converts

There were two kinds of proselytes in the synagogues. One was called "a proselyte of the gate," a Gentile who only attended the services. He now worshiped the true God, but he had not committed himself to full ritualistic and legalistic Judaism. Such proselytes are referred to in the book of Acts as a person who was devout (10:2, 7; 13:50), as "God-fearing" (10:2, 22, 35; 17:4, 17), or as "a worshiper of God" (16:14; 18:7).

The other kind was referred to as "a proselyte of righteousness," so called because he became as religiously Jewish as a Gentile could become. They participated in all the ceremonies, rituals, and feasts; they observed all the cleansing and other rites, both biblical and traditional; and if males, they were circumcised. Those converts were even given Jewish names in order to separate them as much as possible from their pagan past. Contrary to their popular appellation, however, they became anything but righteous. Like the scribes and Pharisees who instructed them, they became paragons of self-righteousness.

Only True Christians Have Power to Live for Christ

Only the new person in Christ has the power to live the Christian life. Only the true child of God can "joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man" (Rom. 7:22), and only the redeemed life, the life "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10) is able to do good works.

We Need the Holy Spirit

We know that only one thing makes a person a Christian, and that is the new birth wrought by the Holy Spirit of God. We experience a nature change, and we are in Christ, and we are growing and changing into His image.

We and our children can all keep the rules and be totally lost. Convictions are good and quite necessary. I have convictions of holiness that I live out each day. Convictions help guide me as I please God. But we must never be content with our children displaying a mere outward conformity to standards. What matters is the new birth. Regardless of how well our precious children obey the external standards at home and at church, unless they are born again internally by the Holy Spirit they cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Bypassing the Holy Spirit

If you want to be or raise a Pharisee, use excessive control and manipulation instead of relying on the Holy Spirit of God. Listen to our Lord warn us about the cruelty of making others try to live the life of faith in their own finite power: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger" (Mt. 23:4).

The Pharisee's did not rely on the Holy Spirit to convict of "sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). Their preferred method was to use guilt and excessive control to conform behavior. God's method is to convert the heart to change behavior.

Pasting on False Fruit

Imagine the absurdity if my apple tree were not bringing forth apples, so I began to duct tape apples to the tree. From a distance it looks real. But close up we can see it's an absurdity. We need to look for the fruit of true conversion in our children's lives, which is evident by the spiritual fruit that comes from the heart: a hunger for God in private prayer, self-motivated seeking after God, brokenness, repentance, etc.

C. S. Lewis Quote

"If conversion to Christianity makes no improvement in a man's outward actions – if he continues to be just a snobbish or spiteful or envious or ambitious as he was before – then I think we must suspect that his 'conversion' was largely imaginary; and after one's original conversion, every time one thinks one has made an advance, that is the test to apply. Fine feelings, new insights, greater interest in 'religion' mean nothing unless they make our actual behavior better."⁸

There is an actual change because of the Holy Spirit. If we try to change ourselves or convert others, we have no power to do so.

The Sanctifying Work of the Holy Spirit

1 Peter 1:2 says we "are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood."

Without the "sanctifying work of the Spirit" we have no ability to make lasting change to anyone's life. We can only increase their status as "children of hell."

III. Superficial faith offers no sanctification, vs. 16-22

Blind Guides

Matthew 23:16a, "Woe to you, blind guides..." Jesus calls the Pharisees "blind guides." What good is a guide who is blind? Jesus elsewhere said that if the blind lead the blind, both of them will fall into a ditch (15:14). This was not a criticism of blind people, because blind people can do wonderful things, but one of the things at which they do not usually excel is acting as guides.⁹

The greatest blindness is self-deception. They did not know they were blind. They thought they could see! Paul the apostle gives first hand testimony to this self-deception in **Philippians 3:5-6**, he says, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Saul of Tarsus was a blind guide until he was converted. He was truly self-deceived until the Lord opened his eyes.

⁸ C. S. Lewis. *Christian Behavior* (The Macmillian Company; New York, 1944). This book was later added to *Mere Christianity* which can be found in C. S. Lewis. *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 2002), 164.

⁹ Sproul, *ibid*.

Breaking Oaths, an Example of Superficial Change

God has promised to give us a measure of holiness in this life. Sincerity and virtue, the desire to please God in all things are the measure of true faith (2 Peter 1:3-10).

The Pharisees lacked the virtue that comes with Holy Spirit empowered sanctification. Through their system of oaths, they had a brilliant way to defraud Gentiles (or so they thought). Brilliant, until Jesus exposed their sanctification as fraud.

This example of making false oaths is typical of the inconsistent nature of trying to sanctify oneself in the power of the flesh. It's simply impossible. Listen to Jesus condemning them as "blind guides" for their inconsistent lives.

The Brilliant Scheme for Lying to Gentiles

Matthew 23:16-20, "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it."

The oaths were based on ownership. The Pharisees were mired in their superstition that if they made a promise by something they owned, that something would be taken away from them. But they could promise all day long on things they didn't own, since it could not be taken away from them.

If a Pharisee went to a Gentile they would swear to pay him at a later date, and promise by the Temple. They wouldn't have to actually keep their word because they determined since they didn't own the Temple, they could swear by it all they wanted, and it wouldn't be taken away from them.

A Jew would never swear to another Jew on a sacrifice, but only on the altar the sacrifice is offered on. Why? Because another Jew would not agree to it, because the Jew knew he would be lying. But in the Pharisees view, **you could lie all you wanted to Gentiles**. You could defraud them all you wanted. They did this by promising by the altar or on the Temple. But never by anything they owned (like gold or a sacrifice). Theirs was a sanctification with lots of loopholes for sinning.

The truth is as Jesus says, Mt. 23:21-22, "And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it." ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."

No Christian Can Live Comfortably in Sin

The truth is, no Christian can live for any length of time in sin. What the Pharisees were missing was the presence of God. They swore by the Temple, by the altar and by heaven, and they were swearing by God.

In other words, they weren't just lying to the Gentiles. They were lying to God. The Christian isn't trying to get away with sin like the Pharisees. The Christian is seeking to be done with sin altogether.

We cry out with the Psalmist in Psalms 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!" ²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

How About You?

You may not make excuses for lying to Gentiles, but do you have an ongoing comfort with sin? God would not have you comfortable in your sin.

- Can God save you from your **lying**?
- Can God save you from your **anger**?
- Can God save you from your **lust**?
- Can God save you from your **complaining**?
- Can God save you from your **worry** or **panic**?
- Can God save you from your **pride**?
- Can God save you from your **selfishness**?

You know the answer! Yes! **Matthew 1:21**, "His name shall be called Jesus for He shall save His people from their sins." Jesus saves and sanctifies.

Hebrews 12:14 says, "There is a holiness, a virtue, a sanctification process that we are to strive for, without which no one will ever see the Lord."

Christ is Pleading!

I think of a popular hymn in our churches:

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high Priest whose Name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

Christ is pleading not simply for our justification, but also for our sanctification and glorification. He is able to "save to the uttermost."

You might be reading this thinking, "Is there any hope for me?" Can God really sanctify me?" The answer is an absolute yes! All those He calls He justifies, and He conforms them to the image of Christ.

Christ Promises for Progressive Sanctification

Listen to Christ's promises to progressively sanctify you completely:

Jude 1:24-25, "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

1 Thess. 5:23-24, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."

Phil. 1:6, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

1 Cor. 1:8-9, God "will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Jesus Christ came to save His people from their sins. He shall save them to the uttermost. What joy to know that whatever Christ begins, He promises to finish!

Superficial faith can't offer you a full-orbed progressive sanctification! It also offers no...

IV. Superficial faith offers no **compassion**, vs. 23-24

Love and Sympathy

Matthew 23:23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

D. L. Moody Quote

I love the words of Dwight L. Moody: “The world does not understand theology or dogma, but it understands love and sympathy.”

Huge Emphasis on Minutia

The scribes and Pharisees went to enormous lengths to regulate matters that seem trivial—how to deliver a divorce certificate, how to dress, how to tithe. For example, the law commanded Israelites to tithe their grain, oil, wine, and firstborn animals (Deut. 14:22–29; Lev. 27:30). But mint, dill, and cummin are marginally edible, aromatic weeds that were occasionally used as seasonings. The rabbis actually debated the need to tithe these marginally savory weeds.

Jesus said these debates might have been tolerable in themselves, but they were distractions.¹⁰

Neglecting the Important Matters

Jesus says be careful not to neglect “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” (Mt. 23:23).

While tithing and religious observance are important, and we should obey God in those things, the most important matters have to deal with how we treat others.

Gal. 5:6 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Pharisees lacked Sympathy

vs. 4, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger”.

The Poor Donkey!

The picture Jesus gives here reflects the common custom of that day, and of people in many underdeveloped countries today, of loading up a donkey, camel, or other beast of burden to the point where it can hardly move. As they traveled down the road, the owner would walk alongside, carrying nothing himself, berating and bearing the animal if it happened to stumble or balk, with no concern for the animal’s feelings or welfare.

If the people did not comply with the Pharisees, they could be put out of the synagogues. The Pharisees loved to control the lives of people, but they did not want their lives to be controlled.

¹⁰ Doriani, D. M. (2008). *Matthew & 2*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 2, p. 340). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 13, that we can speak with rich words and the tongues of men and angels; we can have all faith and theological knowledge; we can even make breathtaking sacrifices, but if we have not love, all that we do is worthless and empty.

By This Shall all People Know

In other words, we can know so much about the Bible and theology, but as Jesus said, "By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, by your love one for another" (**John 13:35**).

Not a Check-Off List

To jump to the outward Christian disciplines without dealing with the heart is nothing more than behavior modification. Christians have holy fruit coming out of their life, but following a set of rules does not make your child a Christian.

Application #1: Being a Christian is not checking off a list! You should have habits of godliness in your life. So should your children. But having these habits of godliness does not make a person a Christian.

Application #2: Some parents believe if their children have the right amount of verses memorized, says the sinner's prayer, dress the right way, and are baptized, then their child must be a Christian! Not true. We are saved by grace through faith, not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). We must be looking for Christ be formed in us, not simply religious standards.

We can get all the lists right and lose our child's soul.

The Gnat and the Camel

Matthew 23:24, "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"

Jesus graphically illustrated the scribes' and Pharisees' inversion of priorities by saying that they would **strain out a gnat and swallow a camel**. The **gnat and the camel** represented the smallest and the largest, respectively, of the ceremonially unclean animals (see Lev. 11:4, 42). Fastidious Pharisees would drink their wine through clenched teeth in order to filter out any small insects that might have gotten into the wine. In their typical reversal of values, those Jewish religious leaders were more concerned about being contaminated by a tiny **gnat** than by a huge **camel**. They were painstaking about formal, ceremonial trivialities but were unconcerned about their hypocrisy, dishonesty, cruelty, greed, self-worship, and a host of other serious sins. They substituted outward acts of religion for the essential virtues of the heart.¹¹

[to be continued Sunday, January 3, 2016]

V. Superficial faith offers no satisfaction, vs. 25-26

A Longing that Cannot Be Filled

Matthew 23:25-26, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of **greed** and **self-indulgence**.²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean."

¹¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 23:13). Chicago: Moody Press.

Greed and Self-Indulgence

The Pharisees were guilty of greed and self-indulgence. *Harpagē* (**greed** or robbery) carries the ideas of plundering, pillaging, and extortion for money, and *akrasia* (**self-indulgence**) has the basic meaning of **lack of self-control** and **unrestrained self-gratification**. The unscrupulous religious leaders robbed the people they were supposed to serve in order to satisfy their own greed. They plundered both the souls and the wallets of the people and used the ill-gotten gains to serve themselves.¹²

Blaise Pascal Quote

The Pharisees were hungry for significance, but they could not fill the void!

Blaise Pascal said that man has a craving in his heart that only God can satisfy. Listen to his words:

In man there is an infinite empty void and craving. What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness [and fullness found in God], of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? In vain we try to fill this void from all our surroundings [with people and stuff]... But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite object, that is to say, only by God Himself."¹³

Empty on the Inside

All people have a longing for wholeness that cannot be filled by the world. The Pharisees tried to fill it with *greed and self-indulgence*. There is a stench coming from the inside of every human being that cannot be covered or cleansed by anything. Only God can clean the inside of the human heart.

"A sinful life is like a dirty room. You might get used to it, but it still stinks."¹⁴ You might be able to spray a scent around it, but it is still dirty. The mold still grows in it.

We can try to fill our hearts with **greed** and **self-indulgence**. But it will not satisfy. No relationship can be your savior. No amount of money can be your savior.

The Wonder of Satisfaction

The way to really grow in Christ is by being satisfied with him. Real change requires greater intimacy and satisfaction with God than with our sin.

False Teachers are Hirelings

There are many false teachers and **hireling** pastors out there that do not care to introduce their people to the one who truly satisfies. They fleece the sheep and leave them to the wolves when danger comes.

Throughout history, false religious leaders have become rich and fat by fleecing those they pretend to serve. Outwardly they appear righteous, caring, and exemplary, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves.¹⁵

¹² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 23:13). Chicago: Moody Press.

¹³ Pascal, *Pensees*, 113.

¹⁴ Rosaria Butterfield from one of her talks.

¹⁵ MacArthur, *ibid.*

Lazy Dogs

Today, many who call themselves pastors could care less about feeding the sheep. They are like the watchmen of Isaiah. Listen to what Isaiah said about the pastors of his day –

Isaiah 56:10-11 “His watchmen are blind;
they are all without knowledge;
they are all silent [lazy] dogs;
they cannot bark,
dreaming, lying down,
loving to slumber.
11 The [greedy] dogs have a mighty appetite;
they never have enough.
But they are shepherds who have no understanding;
they have all turned to their own way,
each to his own gain, one and all.”

Do you hear what God calls pastors who do not feed their sheep? They think that the pulpit is for entertainment and self-help! They do not preach doctrine, but avoid it. The Lord says they are “blind, all ignorant, all lazy dogs that cannot bark, they are greedy dogs, they are shepherds who have no understanding.”

Kosher Souls!

Matthew 23:26, “You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.”

The metaphorical nature of this is demonstrated by what Jesus says here. The Pharisees centered on cleansing the inside of vessels. So Jesus is saying that they should extend their ritual concerns to matters of inner purity. Being ritually clean is negated by the internal sins noted here. You clean the inside of the cup so that it might be “Kosher” – do the same for your souls!¹⁶

A Nature Change is Needed!

What needs to happen is a nature change. Clean the inside of the cup and the plate, and then the outside will change.

We are to instruct new converts into knowing Christ. We are to teach them the Scriptures. But we must be careful to let the Holy Spirit clean the inside of them. We must let Him do the work of conviction.

We don't want to make the mistake of cleaning the outside while the inside is still dirty.

VI. Superficial faith offers no transformation, vs. 27-28**Whitewashed Tombs**

Matthew 23:27-28, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

¹⁶ Osborne, 852–853.

Dressing up a corpse

Jesus said a Pharisee is “like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness...” So a Pharisee may “outwardly appear righteous to others...” but really they are “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (23:27).

And here is the most frightening thing: without a changed heart Jesus says there is no way our children will “escape being sentenced to hell” (23:33). As Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (Jn. 3:3).

Faking the Faith

It is possible to raise a good actor. There are many young people who are good at faking faith. One way people fake faith is with legalism and formalism. They put lots of extra rules around them that makes them look righteous. They are spiritually dead people propped up by rules and tradition. Some of the greatest children of hell are legalists who are filled not with love, but with self-righteousness and condemnation for all who are not like them. The true test of faith is the new birth. All who have been given a new heart and Spirit are filled with a growing love for God and others.

Touched but not Transformed: Hebrews 6

Something that ought to frighten godly parents is the realization that our children can be touched by God without being transformed by God. They can be drawn by God without being actually converted. As parents we must not stop short of seeing our children experience true regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Without regeneration, our children are just like the “fake Christians” of Hebrews 6. Their description should wake us up to the possibility of our children being simply “propped up” by others, but not converted. Consider this description from Hebrews 6:4-9:

- once enlightened
- tasted the heavenly gift
- shared in the Holy Spirit
- tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come
- they fall away
- describes their nature as a nature of “thorns and thistles”

In other words these are people that have been touched by God. They've made a decision for God. They've decided to turn over a new leaf. They've been touched but not transformed. They've not repented of their sins. They've not left all to follow Christ. They follow Christ for carnal benefits. Applied to our children, these young people follow Christ for mom and dad, for the sake of family tradition, or simply because they know nothing else. I've spoken to several children on their way to falling away, and once it was known that they were unconverted I asked them why they stayed so long with a mere formalism. Their answers ranged from “I like the music of the church” to “my parents expect me to attend.” What is clear to me is that in most cases, without conversion our children eventually go to the environment they are most comfortable in: the world.

VII. False faith offers no **Savior**, vs. 29-36

Snakes!

Matthew 23:29-36, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.³³ You **serpents**, you **brood of vipers**, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

The Pharisees Unmasked

Jesus calls them snakes and brings the sermon to a climax. They are not God’s friends. They are His enemies! They are not the righteous people they say they are. The mask is taken off! They are the enemies of Christ. They will kill Christ just like they killed the prophets.

Like the **whitewashed tombs**, the scribes and Pharisees **on the outside** appeared **beautiful, but inside they** were also like the tombs, **full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness**. They were spiritually dead and had no genuine regard for God’s law, despite their outward praise of it and claim to be its true interpreters and teachers. In an infinitely worse way than the tombs ceremonially defiled those who touched them, the scribes and Pharisees spiritually defiled those whom they touched.¹⁷

More Guilty than All

“**Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers;**” Jesus said. “Your scheming to put to death the greatest prophet of all,” He declared in effect, “will be the final **measure** of the murderous conspiracies of your **fathers** against God’s messengers.” They were about to culminate all the guilt of those in the past who killed God’s messengers. This was the supreme act of sin against God’s prophets, as they murdered the Prophet-Messiah.¹⁸

What would Happen if You were Unmasked?

What would it be if you were unmasked?

Conclusion: Lament over Jerusalem, vs. 37-39

Lament over Jerusalem

Matthew 23:37-39, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers

¹⁷ MacArthur, *ibid.*

¹⁸ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 23:13). Chicago: Moody Press.

her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate.³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

The Compassion of Jesus

Jesus is compassionate. But the leaders of Israel have always opposed Him. longed to draw Israel to Himself and protect her just as a mother **hen gathers her chicks under her wings** to protect them from a storm that would batter them or a hawk that would devour them. There was a beautiful intimacy and tenderness in Jesus' words and no doubt in His voice as He mourned over His people. He had come "to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).¹⁹

Ichobod

Vs. 38, "See, your house is left to you desolate." Imagine the scene. Jesus told the people that "your house is left to you desolate." Everyone's heads snapped around. They looked at the massive walls, the temple, and the houses, and all were in fine condition. The temple stood tall. The city over which Jesus wept was filled with the bustling activity of everyday commerce. Nothing looked any different. There was no appearance of desolation. But Jesus said that the desolation was coming soon. This was another preview of the Olivet Discourse, wherein He would foretell the destruction of the temple and the city, and His own coming in judgment. What did Jesus mean when He said, "You shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD'?"" The people of Jerusalem had cried these words as He came into the city only a few days before (21: 9). Jesus seems to have been foretelling His future return, when His people truly would be ready to receive Him.²⁰

Saul of Tarsus in the Crowd

To see the love of Jesus for even His enemies, realize that Saul of Tarsus was a member of the Sanhedrin and very likely present this day in the crowd. Consider that the Woes of Jesus are not simply there to condemn, but to wake up the religious, but spiritually dead leaders of Israel, and many in the crowd who were lost.

Queen Mary Ship

I'm told that when the Queen Mary was retired it had been the largest ocean liner to go across the ocean. During WWII it was used to carry troops and then after the war it became a passenger liner. Then in 1967 it was retired to become a floating restaurant. When they brought it back to refurbish it, I'm told that they removed the three smoke stacks and they were to repair them. The problem was, when they set them upon the deck, they disintegrated. You see, they had been covered with 30 coats of paint, and when they looked at it all of the steel had rusted away and all that was left was paint. **THE SUBSTANCE WAS GONE!**

¹⁹ MacArthur, Mt. 23:37.

²⁰ Sproul, *ibid.*