
Condemning the Old Order

Matthew 23:1-39

Russ Kennedy

Confrontation, condemnation, pronouncements... no one likes them. But sometimes they are necessary. To merely say what one is for without saying what one is against is not full and good ministry...

Jesus confronts, condemns and make pronouncements against a group of people.

“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples...”

Our text begins with “then”. This connects us to what has gone before. Just before this, all of the different groups who leaders in the culture and religion of Israel have tried to trap Jesus with their tricky questions. Jesus had responded to each one with answers that exposed their malice, hatred, and attempts to entrap Jesus. He has been dialoging with each of these groups. With the conservative leaders of the Old Order, the Mosaic Law and economy standing around, Jesus turns to the crowd and His disciples.

Their Character (v.1-12)

Keep in mind that Matthew is not only recording what Jesus said, he is also writing to the church of his day and our day as well. In the critique of the Pharisees there is sharp and pointed critique of some of the leadership that emerged in the church. Today, this critique is almost shocking in how contemporary it is.

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 synagogues ⁷ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

First, Jesus recognizes the Mosaic Law and the authority of the Pharisees to teach the Law. They sit in Moses’ seat, meaning, they have the authority to teach what Moses wrote. So, what they teach *from the Law of Moses* is to be done.

Second, Jesus is limiting the authority of the religious leaders. When they sit in Moses' seat, that is, when they are actually teaching what Moses wrote, they are to be honored. Clearly, Jesus has condemned all the additions and subtractions from the Scriptures that the Pharisees taught. They had an authority, but it was limited to their accurate handling of the Law,

But there is another issue. All through this critique runs the theme of "Words without deeds." Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for five fatal characteristics.

Do not practice what they preach (v.3)

They live differently than what they say. Jesus simply warns the people not to pay attention to them. Practicing what you preach is the acid test of authenticity. In every age in every "religion" this is the troubling problem. Religious leaders' words and deeds do not match up. Jesus exhorts the people to listen to their words but not to emulate their conduct.

Required of others what they are unwilling to require of themselves (v. 4)

They were inconsistent in their application of the Mosaic Law and their own additions to the Law. They applied stern and hard measures to people but were unwilling to live by those same standards. They were strict for others and loose for themselves.

The second aspect of this charge is the mercilessness of the Pharisees. They were unwilling to try to alleviate the burdens they had imposed. They had no grace in themselves and showed no grace to others. Their strictness in the requirements of the Law led to harshness in their treatment of people.

Loved public displays of piety (v. 5)

They were lovers of the being in the limelight. They craved the attention and applause of the people. The primary aim in all the good works they did was not to please God but to impress people. In verse 5 it is their religious practice that is being condemned. Even in the Old Covenant, doing good for the sake of being seen and being affirmed was condemned. Yet this terrible evil had deeply infested the religious leadership of the old Order. They wanted everyone to know how *spiritual* they were.

Relished honorific titles and in being paid respect (v.6–10)

Jesus condemns a second aspect of their pride. Jesus denounces their craving for titles, for the recognition that was represented by degrees and titles. Their glory walls were filled with their certificates, their achievements, their diplomas. They required that people address them with titles they believed they had earned and therefore deserved. They wanted everyone to know how *important* they were.

Jesus' critique is not a critique of titles and honor as being essentially wrong. No, the problem is that their use of them had effectively undercut the respect that God deserved and the authority He exercised. In using these titles, they had put themselves in the place of God. They required that others honor their place and

position and power. Yet they refused to honor Jesus, the Messiah. The titles they so sought were the very titles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Misunderstood ministry (11–12).

They did not see their ministry as an opportunity for service. They saw ministry primarily as a sphere of management. They saw ministry as a way to control people. Humility in ministry was lost and even derided. Their pride craved recognition. Ministry was more a way to serve themselves.

Jesus stood before them as the opposite of what they were. Jesus came as a servant. He was humble in heart. Therefore, He ought to have been recognized as their master.

Are these failures in character confined to Jewish leaders in the first century AD? Are they not always contemporary? If Christian leaders fail in these five ways, their failure is comprehensive indeed. (Adapted from Green, p.241-242)

Their Condemnation (v.13-36)

Jesus takes up the language of the Old Testament prophets. He pronounces seven woes. That there are seven is significant. The Old Order is being brought to end. Jesus pronounces a full and finished condemnation of its leaders. Here are the seven condemnations of the religious leaders of Israel, the scribes and the Pharisees.

Opening and Closing Kingdom's Door (v.13-15)

¹³ “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. 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.

They have rejected the kingdom for themselves. They are hypocrites, pretending to be in the kingdom when they are not in it at all. They refuse to enter the kingdom, a theme that has been prominent throughout the book of Matthew. Jesus came preaching the kingdom. To enter the Kingdom, people had to believe and bow to Him. But the religious leadership refused and therefore, could not enter.

They were barring entry for others. They stand in the way of people accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Their teaching, their practice and their open opposition closed the door to some who might otherwise have entered. Their role as students of the Scripture should have been to point to Jesus as the Messiah and to welcome those who came to the gates of the kingdom. It is no wonder that they were castigated for their ways.

They were turning converts to Judaism into slaves of the Law. Proselytes generally were non-Jews, that is, Gentiles, who embraced the Mosaic Law and worshipped Yahweh through the Old Covenant. But instead of what God intended

for converted Gentiles, the scribes and Pharisees were enslaving them to the Mosaic Law. Their strict and loaded up interpretations and demands were even more rigidly being applied to converts.

Is this done today? Are there churches (more correctly, religious clubs) whose leaders are clearly not believing and bowing to Jesus? Dare I say, many? Are there churches and pulpits whose way of handling the Bible closes the door to the kingdom? Yes. Are there churches whose understanding of the Bible binds people to the Old Covenant, to the Mosaic Law? Sadly, yes many. Too many so-called churches, because they do not preach the gospel, are condemning their hearers to hell.

Blind guides of Blind People (v.16-22)

¹⁶ “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. ²¹ 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.

The scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders, were supposed to be the instructors, the guides of God’s people. But they themselves are blind. Blindness in the Matthew is lostness. The blind do not see, cannot see and are not a part of the Kingdom. So there were unbelieving, blind religious leaders who were leading and guiding Jewish people. But largely the Jewish people were also blind. This powerful picture so aptly describes much of the religious leadership today, as well. The blind leading the blind. How do you think that will end?

Jesus chose to focus on a key issue about oaths. Oaths are important feature in Matthew. The first and last of Jesus' discourses concern oaths. The first, in the Mountain Sermon, warned us against the danger of taking oaths (5:33). Now the Pharisees are condemned for their casual treatment of oaths. The idea of oaths has been significant through the Gospel. Because of an oath Herod made, John the Baptist was murdered (14:7). At the upcoming trial of Jesus, the high priest will misuse the oath of testimony (26:63). Peter will deny Jesus with an oath (26:72).

Jesus condemns to the cynical arguments of the Pharisees. Using the Mosaic Law and their own massive additions to it, they are creating tortured excuses for not keeping one's promises. But it is not to serve people, it is because of their own self-focused motivations. They are not really interested in the temple; they are interested in the gold of the temple. They are not interested in the altar but very interested in the gifts on it. They set aside the binding nature the witness to the

oath in order to enforce the necessity of the gift. They do this all for their own to their own advantage.

Jesus is also enforcing the importance of keeping an oath. As a promise keeping God, He expects people to keep the oaths they make. We should not make oaths, letting our word be our bond. But when we do make oaths, we should keep them.

Wrong Priorities in the Scriptures (v.23-24)

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. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

The scribes and Pharisees’ approach to the Scriptures was not driven primarily to understand the text. They were caught up in details of the text to press home the obligations for others. Jesus gives an example. Notice that there is a “both-and” and a wrong emphasis. The Pharisees were all about the minutiae of what is to be given and how much and when. They were paying attention to small bits of spices. But they were ignoring the weightier matters of justice and mercy. The very purpose of the Mosaic Law was being ignored in favor of figuring out how to tithe on home spices. Their heart was driven by control and legalism. Jesus says that obedience is important, but justice and mercy ever more weighty.

They strain out a minor impurity (gnats) and swallow a gigantic one (camels). . It is all too easy to miss the main things in God’s purposes, to be blind to the great highway signs in his revelation, and to get lost in byways and alleys.

We must guard against this. It is easy to want to be precisely correct and yet have no grace, no gentleness, no understanding of others. Justice has been settled at the cross. Mercy ought to flood our relationships. Yet, we often are quick to stand as a judge over our brother or sister and not be generous in our treatment of them

Focus on the Externals (v.25-26)

²⁵ “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.

How typical of legalistic religion. How typical of the Old Order. How easy it is to focus on the outside, not the inside. As long as everything is clean on the outside, then it does not matter what is on the inside. But carefully notice Jesus’ irony. The religious leaders are concerned about clean cups and plates, but totally not concerned about clean hearts. This is almost a summary of all that has gone before.

Outward Righteousness masking Inward Corruption (v.27-28)

²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed 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.

This is a scathing denunciation. Tombs were often a labyrinth of caves in hillsides. They were often painted with a white lye, a white wash to mark that they were tombs and that they were being cared for. The tombs looked good on the outside. But inside they contained the decaying bodies of dead people. What about the religious leaders? They have the appearance of godliness but are without its inward life. They are spiritually dead but are leaders of the Old Order, the Old Covenant religion.

But Jesus turns and speaks directly to some individuals. He commands some Pharisees. Matthew is writing directly to some as well. "First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean." He is addressing them directly. He has been describing them to the people. But now he wheels and calls on them to deal with themselves, first.

Persecute and Murder Opponents (v.29-36)

²⁹ "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.

Jesus pronounces a woe on them: They are tomb builders. Sarcastically, they are building monuments to the very ones their ancestors martyred. But there is also a prophetic sense of this as well. As the gospel begins to go out from Jerusalem, the religious leaders will arise against it and commission a Saul to lead the destruction of this new order.

The truly righteous have been killed down through the whole of the Old Testament. It began with Abel in Genesis 4 and ends with Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24. The Pharisees then are not better than all the murderers of the Old Testament history and canon. Why? At this very moment, they are plotting to kill Jesus. They are going to crucify Him.

Matthew is validating the persecution of the church in the early days of its life and ministry. It was not the Romans at first who persecuted the apostles. It was the religious leaders of Judaism. They did all that was stated here. So they not only crucified the Messiah, but they also imprisoned, flogged and even stoned the servants of the church.

In all of this they, the Pharisees, are what Judaism has become. Jesus' condemnation of the leaders, the strongest proponents of strict Old Order religion is a condemnation of its practice *in the false way it was generally practiced*. True adherents, true believers, recognized Jesus as the Messiah and bowed to Him.

Their Consequence (v.37-39)

³⁷ "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 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.' "

70 AD is coming. The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem will take place in less than 40 years. For Matthew's audience, it is even closer.

The Patience of God

Israel has long been a people who rejected God's Law, God's prophets and now, God's Messiah. The heart of God was to enfold them. He loved them. In spite of their many evils and transgressions, He wanted to gather them as His people. But they would not. Their refusal was going to culminate in their calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, their Messiah.

The Punishment from God

God's patience is long-suffering and long-lasting. But now it has run out. So the house of Israel will be desolate. It will be abandoned. Jerusalem, as the central city of the civil and religious governance will be destroyed. But the word means more than that. All that was represented by Jerusalem in the Old Order will be left empty. It will be a ruins.

Jesus' enigmatic statement, "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' " will have its near fulfillment in Palm Sunday. But it will come to its final eschatological fulfillment when Jesus comes again just before the Day of Wrath.

Reflect and Respond

How dangerously up to date this is! Are we rejecting the kingdom ourselves and obstructing the entrance of others? Do we have a legalistic approach to church growth, interested only in our own neck of the woods? Do we break solemn promises if convenient or if the heat is on? Do we misconstrue God's revelation by neglecting the central and going for the peripheral? Do we go for external things and ceremonial precision, but remain indifferent to the attitude within? Are we walking around as a living lie, a spiritual tomb, highly decorated, maybe, on the outside, but inwardly full of corruption and dead men's bones? And keepers of ancient monuments? What a list! How important for Christian Pharisees to take it to heart, and for us all to note the tendencies to Pharisaism that lie embedded in each one of us! (Green, p.245)

What we have just heard has focused mostly on the failures of Israel and her religious leaders. Sadly, we are all too familiar with what Jesus condemns here. Our prayer is that God will help us and give us the grace to be the kind of church, the kind of leaders across all our ministries that are pleasing to Him.