

## **Introduction**

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, both they and all their descendants died spiritually. They were darkened in their minds, cut off from God relationally, and came under the domination of the prince of the power of the air. Human beings in their ungodliness and unrighteousness have suppressed the truth, but that has not resulted in a lack of religion. Rather, human beings come up with their own religions. Even people who possess the revealed word of God come up with their own religion. The Apostle Paul calls them self-made religions. The Pharisees are among them. They were the most religious people among the Jews at the time of Christ. But theirs was a self-made religion born out of their own depravity. It was corrupt and called for denunciation, and denouncing the Pharisees is what Jesus did.

[Read Text and Pray]

What we have read this morning are some of the most stunning words ever to come out of the mouth of Jesus. Here we have "the other Jesus"—the one people don't talk about much. The average Joe on the street would describe Jesus as meek and mild and loving. Rarely would he ever say that Jesus is severe and harsh. But he is. And this text demonstrates just that. At least seven times Jesus utters the word "Woe" to the scribes and Pharisees, and his statement of judgment is unflinching. It should be clear from this text that Jesus Christ abhors what is evil and in this case WHO is evil.

And the evil people he denounces are the religious leaders of the Jews. He denounces them because they live out a religion that proceeds from the darkness of their depraved hearts. They may be the teachers of the law, but they have missed what the law is really about. Their man-made religion is reprehensible to God and leads people astray.

Please, do not get the idea that because the focus of the denunciation of Jesus was directed at Jewish Pharisees and scribes that it does not pertain to me and you. The religion of depravity is rooted in hypocrisy and hypocrisy is a threat to us all. The main point here is not just for bonafide Pharisees but for us all, and that main point is that the religion of the Pharisees and scribes is a religion arising out of depravity and those who practice it are sure to be justly condemned. In bringing us to that conclusion, Jesus provides for us four aspects of depraved religion. We see its results, its nature, its root, and its recompense.

### **I. The Results of Depraved Religion.**

This is where Jesus starts. What makes depraved religion so abhorrent from the start is where it takes and what it makes. Jesus says that the religion of the Pharisees and scribes takes people away from heaven. Jesus says, "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." That is a staggering indictment. Isn't religion all about getting into heaven? Of course it is! And this statement stands in stark contrast to the postmodern ideals of our day which assert that there is no such thing as absolute truth. There is only your truth and my truth. And so before God all we have to do is live according to our own truth. And if you live according to your truth, you will be okay. But Jesus asserts that the Pharisees' truth is no truth at all. And instead of taking people INTO the kingdom of heaven, it keeps them out.

There are not multiple ways to become right with God and live with him eternally. There is ONLY ONE. Every other belief system is a blockade that leads folks astray thus turning them back. It is especially tragic for the Pharisees because here is the one true Savior right there in their midst, but they were holding fast to their bankrupt ideas and rejecting him.

That is where the religion of depravity takes folks—away from God. Jesus adds another sad result of the Pharisaic religion; namely, what it makes is proselytes who are twice as much a child of hell as themselves. Their discipleship efforts may be herculean but the results are no good. The followers of the Pharisees were only more hellish than they themselves.

C. Making disciples is Christ's own commission. It is our calling if we are followers of Christ to call others to come after him. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by him. And those who truly come to him are changed. They are new creatures. They pursue holiness. They are more and more heavenly and less and less hellish. That is what we are to pursue.

## **II. The Nature of Depraved Religion.**

A. A single, overriding characteristic of the depraved religion of the Pharisees permeates Jesus's denunciation. That characteristic is hypocrisy. Jesus repeatedly denounces the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites.

This word comes out of the ancient theater to describe actors on the stage. An actor would play a role, pretend to be a character he was actually not. Hypocrisy is all about appearance. A number of years ago when the Laynes lived in the hills of Kentucky, there was a startling commotion in the backyard. Our little white dog named Buddy was going crazy. I went out there to discover that a opossum had gotten into his dog house. I brought my shovel and began poking the animal, but it would not move. Finally, I flipped the dog house over; it came off its foundation and there lay the opossum. It opened its eyes and snarled over and over, but it would not do anything. At last, I slid my shovel underneath its body and flung him up in the air over the fence into the pasture. And the thing landed on his feet. He looked at me for a minute as if to say, "I fooled you!" and slowly walked away. Opossums pretend to sleep and they pretend to be vicious, but it is all an act. They never INTend to be what they PREtend to be.

And such were the Pharisees. Their zeal for the law was an act. It was a false impression. It was not truly sincere. Paul described this kind of person to a T. In 2 Timothy 3, he described corrupt people that will mark the last days. They will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, . . . swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." He said, however, that they would have "the appearance of godliness," but "denying its power." For the Pharisees, righteousness was a grandiose appearance, and that is all.

Jesus specifies several marks of their hypocrisy. They would make a show of how far they would travel to make a proselyte. They would distinguish between aspects of the temple when making oaths so as to not be bound by them in some cases. They made a great show out of the smallest of matters but disregarded the most important. You see, they would tithe from their herbs. In this way they showed meticulous care, but it was for things God's law actually never addressed. And that deflected away from the fact that they neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In effect they were straining out a gnat out of their soup but swallowing a camel. They cared greatly about pomp and ceremony like eating off of a ceremonially clean dish, but they ignored the scum in their hearts.

Here is an example of those who make a big deal about following the rules and who judge others the loudest when they break the rules. But they do not keep ALL the rules themselves. And the only rules they care about are the ones they do keep. If someone were to confront them about their sin, they are taken aback and want to point out all the rules they DO follow as though that gives them a pass for their wrongs. How often do we follow in their footsteps when we act as though the good we do (that we want everybody to see) gives us a pass to do evil things like refusing to love our neighbor and failing to show mercy and justice and be faithful.

The Pharisees were like whitewashed tombs. Tombs were everywhere in the land. According to OT law, you could not touch a tomb without becoming unclean and having to go through ritual cleansing before approaching the Temple. It would take days. So it was especially important at this time of the Passover that travelers not inadvertently come into contact with a tomb and thus have to miss out on the sacrifice. Therefore, the Jews had the practice of whitewashing the tombs so they would stand out. They gleamed in the bright sunlight. It had to have been a stunning sight. But the sparkle could not hide that these were tombs, places of death and uncleanness. Such were the Pharisees. And such is every religion born of depraved minds. It is hypocrisy, pretense, a show.

There is one more characteristic, denial. The Pharisees refuse to see that they are no different from anybody else. The teachers of the religion of depravity truly think they are not capable of the sins other people commit. Jesus points to how they decorate the tombs of the prophets and build monuments to them. It is a big show of honoring the prophets of days gone by. And all the while, they declare that if they had been around then, they would not have been involved in the mistreatment and murder their forebears brought upon those prophets. Oh no, they are better than that. But not truly, for they are about to murder the one the prophets foretold. And they are about to persecute the prophets Jesus would send.

B. Before moving on I need to make sure we are not like the Pharisees as we consider their hypocrisy. You see, it would be very pharisaic of us if we were to shake our heads in disbelief that they could be so self-absorbed and so hypocritical as though to say, "WE are certainly better than that!" No! That would itself be hypocritical in a dangerous way. The fact is our sinful flesh tends in the direction of hypocrisy. Way back in the garden, when sin came in so did hypocrisy. God confronts Adam and then Eve and both try to shift the blame as though to say, "It is not my fault; I am not to blame." That is hypocrisy. That is pretending to be something they were not, and what they were not was innocent. Hypocrisy is how we deflect our guilt.

So we cannot escape hypocrites. They are everywhere. I was listening to a sermon on hypocrisy this week. The preacher was answering the objection some offer as to why they won't go to church—there are so many hypocrites in the church. I had to chuckle because of the way he said it, but what he said was exactly right. He said, "I would rather go to church with hypocrites than go to hell with hypocrites." Then he asked if all the hypocrites in Walmart are going to keep you from going there?

Hypocrisy is one of those sins that we all must flee. And we need to be certain that our faith itself is not hypocritical, that the essence of our worship is not hypocrisy. At the most fundamental level, we have to be able to admit that we are no better than anybody else, that each of us is born in the same sinful and depraved condition as everybody else. And ultimately the ONLY thing that makes a difference in anyone of us is the grace of God. And if we recognize that, it will bring a screeching halt to our high opinions of ourselves. It will bring our noses down out of the clouds. It will put us on our knees. We will cease pursuing our own glory and engage ourselves for the glory of God.

### **III. The Root of Depraved Religion.**

A. Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees not only for their outward hypocrisy, but also for the root from which their hypocrisy springs. The root is their heart. It is what is on the inside. Lying beneath the surface, the heart of man is the sin factory. That is where desire and love of self are enshrined. What is on the inside is what leads to what is on the outside. Depraved religion tries to clean up the outside while overlooking or hiding from the dreadful condition of what is on the inside. The dreadful condition on the inside destroys any truth of outside cleanness. Jesus said, "First, clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. And what does Jesus say is on the inside of the Pharisees?"

B. First, it is blindness. They are blind. Jesus indicts the Pharisees in verse 16 as blind guides. What an oxymoron. They think they are capable of guiding others to truth but they themselves are blind to it. In verse 26, Jesus uses the word again, "You blind Pharisee!" Sin darkens the mind. In John 3 Jesus teaches that in order to be able to SEE the kingdom of God one must be born from above. One must be given eyes to see in the new birth. Jesus condemns the Pharisees' blindness for their willful insanity of building a religious system when they cannot even see the truth. Oh that instead of trying to lead others, they would have taken up the cry of the blind men by the roadside to let their eyes be opened. But no, in blind arrogance, they sit on the seat of Moses and instruct the people.

C. Second, Jesus explains that another corrupting reality of what is on the inside of the Pharisees is the combination of greed and self-indulgence. I think Jesus has his sights set on the disregard the Pharisees and those like them have for the masses whom they extort. Their teaching and their position among the people is not driven by a compassionate desire for their well-being. Rather, it is driven by the gain that accrues unto them in their leadership. The more people who follow them, the stronger and more powerful they become. Their position of honor and respect is cemented. And they indulge in it.

D. In verse 27, Jesus further says the Pharisees are like whitewashed tombs. Inside they are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. That is, inside they are dead. What you put inside a tomb is a dead person. And that's what they are on the inside. Coming into contact with a dead body made a person ceremonially unclean. In that condition they were forbidden from entering the temple and thus approaching God. Jesus is saying that they are dead within and cut off from God from their very hearts. And they make others unclean through contact with them. People should avoid their teaching like they do the whitewashed tombs.

E. Finally, down in verse 28, Jesus says that on the inside the Pharisees are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. The way the Pharisees appeared was a sham. The hypocrisy that was evident in them started in their hearts. They deceived themselves and did not really love the law of God in which they pretended to delight.

The root of depraved religion is depravity itself. Depravity is the word we use to describe the deadness of the human heart by nature. It is morally corrupt and wilfully debilitated. It is the heart deprived of life. There is no real fear of God. There is no real seeking for God. There is no real peace or joy only cursing and bitterness, and they bring ruin and misery.

What Jesus is describing here is every human being by nature, but it is this condition he came to save us from. Jesus did not come merely to keep us out of hell. He came to set us free from the depravity that permeates our hearts. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might

die to sin and live to righteousness. We were dead in our trespasses and sins in which we used to live, following the course of this world, following the spirit that still works in those who reject God. We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath just like everybody else. The problem with the Pharisees is that they practiced religion and set themselves forth as teachers of religion without a change of heart. As Jesus said, they needed to be cleaned up on the inside first.

The need is the same for every human being. By nature we are all tombs of death. All the whitewash we can apply won't change it. But if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things are passed away and new things have come. If anyone is in Christ, he is no longer defined by what he was. But the only way to get from death to life is in Christ.

#### **IV. The Recompense for those Who Practice Depraved Religion.**

A. The entirety of this passage is marked by the word, "woe." The word refers to grief, anguish, and affliction. It comes from the lips of Jesus as a prophetic announcement of the horrific enactment of the judgment of God.

Listen to what Jesus says to what may well be some of the most religious persons the world has ever known: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" Depraved religion is devilish. You can't help but think that as you hear Jesus refer to the Pharisees as serpents. But the image of a viper is of that which is deceitful and deadly. Young vipers were sometimes mistaken for a dried twig. They looked like a good way to get a fire going, but when picked up their bite was like fire and it could kill. Justice seemed to come upon these little vipers when farmers would burn off their fields. They would set fire to the dried dead stalks remaining in the field after harvest to prepare for next year's planting. As the heat and flames approached the dens of the vipers, they would slither away in a desperate attempt to avoid being consumed. Often they were unsuccessful and were caught by the flames.

With the depraved religion of Pharisaism, its darkness, deadness, uncleanness, and lawlessness, how could they think they would avoid hell? No, they would perish just like those slithering vipers. Jesus declared that he would send prophets and wise men to them and they would persecute them, but this was so that the punishment of Jewish rejection of all the prophets would justly fall on them. The recompense of depraved religion is to receive God's just condemnation. One aspect of that condemnation was coming. Jesus spoke starkly, "all these things will come upon this generation." Jesus was speaking of the terrible judgment that would fall on Jerusalem in AD 70. But it prefigures the final judgment. Then those who have made a refuge of depraved religion of whatever sort will not be saved by their religiosity. There is one God and one mediator between God and man and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is salvation in no one else. No other name has been given under heaven among men by which we must be saved. But that one has, and if you want to escape being sentenced to hell, you must repent of your sins and trust in Jesus. He will save you.

B. And not only should we flee to Jesus for salvation, we should flee from the tendencies and temptations to reflect the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Perhaps the key application pertains to worship. So much emphasis in our day is on the outside—how things look, how they sound, and how they make us feel. But worship does not start on the outside. It starts in the heart. It begins with a heart that truly loves God. Jesus explained to the woman he met at the Samaritan well, "true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such people to worship him." We all have a tendency to externalize and make the appearance the focus rather than focus on the heart, but Jesus's denunciation here warns us to beware.

Following Jesus is the opposite of practicing depraved religion. It starts with the heart. It does not minimize or rationalize sin. It admits its depravity and sin, confesses it rather than deny it. It works hard, not to receive but because it has received. It embraces grace.

### **Conclusion**

The world is full of religion. Human sin and depravity have produced a multitude of religions. All of them are human attempts to attain some sort of salvation based on human effort. When we come to Jesus, we are not coming to a man-made religion but to the savior who made humans. He died to save humans not according to our works but according to His work for us. For his sake let us put hypocrisy behind us and trusting him, let us worship and serve him to whom be the glory.